

BOTTEGHE OSCURE

Edita a cura di
MARGUERITE CAETANI

Redattore: **GIORGIO BASSANI**

Il contenuto della rivista non può esser riprodotto senza permesso scritto della Direzione, e in ogni caso si dovrà sempre indicare che l'opera fu pubblicata per la prima volta da *Botteghe Oscure*.

Toute reproduction du contenu de cette revue est interdite sans la permission écrite de la Direction, et on devra toujours indiquer que l'œuvre a paru pour la première fois dans *Botteghe Oscure*.

No part of this review may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the Editor, and without stating that the work was first published in *Botteghe Oscure*.

Copyright by Botteghe Oscure

ROMA

BOTTEGHE OSCURE

QUADERNO XIII

Via delle Botteghe Oscure, 32

ROMA MCMLIV

DISTRIBUTORI
DI BOTTEGHE OSCURE

ITALIA

DE LUCA, Editore
Via Gaeta, 14 - Roma

FRANCIA

LIBRAIRIE LA HUNE
170, Boulevard Saint-Germain, Paris VI

GRAN BRETAGNA

HAMISH HAMILTON, Ltd.
90, Great Russell Street, London, W.C.1

STATI UNITI

FARRAR, STRAUS & YOUNG
101 Fifth Avenue, New York 3
(*Trade*)

GOTHAM BOOK MART
41 West 47th Street, New York City
(*Subscription and Retail*)

I N D I C E

René Char	<i>Marge d'Hypnos</i>	11
Georges Bataille	<i>L'Être Indifférencié n'est rien</i>	14
Jean Cayrol	<i>Le Miroir de la misère</i>	17
	<i>Terre présente</i>	
René Cazelles	<i>Poèmes</i>	22
Vivette Perret	<i>Les Mariés</i>	26
Maryse Lafont	<i>Mère extrême</i>	37
André du Bouchet	<i>Emplois de feu</i>	39
Roger Laporte	<i>Souvenir de Reims</i>	43
Paul Février	<i>Poèmes</i>	64
Jacques Dupin	<i>Poèmes</i>	66
Paul Valet	<i>Poèmes</i>	69
Paulène Aspel	<i>Triptyque américain</i>	72
André Vannier	<i>Les Prisonniers</i>	78
 Dylan Thomas	 <i>Three Letters</i>	 93
Vernon Watkins	<i>Elegy for the Latest Dead</i>	103
David Paul	<i>The Kite</i>	106

David Gascoyne	<i>Elegiac Improvisation on the Death of Paul Eluard</i>	118
Burns Singer	<i>The Love of Orpheus</i>	122
	<i>Poems</i>	
George Barker	<i>Letter to a Deaf Poet</i>	134
John Lehmann	<i>No Other Word</i>	142
	<i>The Wind Carried Away</i>	
Douglas Newton	<i>Foundations of our City</i>	146
John Hyslop	<i>The Tide</i>	150
Robert Conquest	<i>In the Marshes</i>	154
James Russell Grant	<i>A Cloud of Ghosts</i>	159
Michael Sayers	<i>The Triumph of Rationalism</i>	162
Kay Cicellis	<i>The Death of a Town</i>	175
Robert Horan	<i>The Riddle of the Sphinx</i>	213
Conrad Aiken	<i>The Walk in the Garden</i>	225
Julia Randall	<i>Poems</i>	231
Albert Herzing	<i>Night Letter</i>	238
	<i>Whistling</i>	
David Stuart	<i>Bird Man</i>	243
Marya Zaturenska	<i>Poems</i>	253
Horace Gregory	<i>Gifts of the Age</i>	256
	<i>A Concerto with Three Speakers</i>	
Eleanor Ross Taylor	<i>At the Carnival</i>	264
	<i>Forbearance</i>	
David Wagoner	<i>Poems</i>	270
Isabella Gardner	<i>Of Flesh and Bone</i>	274

Cleveland Moffett	<i>A Costly Project</i>	277
W. S. Merwin	<i>Poems</i>	285
William Belvin	<i>Poems</i>	291
Charles Smith	<i>Four Poems on Pictures</i>	295
M. Chadbourne	<i>Storm before Dawn</i>	298
	<i>The Big Tent</i>	
George Andrew Vukelich	<i>The Memoirs of a Young</i>	
	<i>Man</i>	302
Josephine Herbst	<i>Hunter of Doves</i>	310
Edoardo Cacciatore	<i>Altri Graduali</i>	345
Guglielmo Petroni	<i>Noi dobbiamo parlare</i>	352
Cecrope Barilli	<i>Poesie</i>	463

RENÉ CHAR

MARGE d'HYPNOS

I

POÈME

Notre-Dame-des-Lumières qui restez seule sur votre rocher, brouillée avec votre église, favorable à ses insurgés, nous ne vous devons rien qu'un regard d'ici-bas.

Je vous ai quelquefois détestée. Vous n'étiez jamais nue. Votre bouche était sale. Mais je sais aujourd'hui que j'ai exagéré car ceux qui vous baisaient avaient souillé leur table.

Les passants que nous sommes n'ont jamais exigé que le repos leur vint avant l'épuisement. Gardienne des efforts, vous n'êtes pas marquée, sinon du peu d'amour dont vous fûtes couverte.

Vous êtes le moment d'un mensonge éclairé, le gourdin encrassé, la lampe punissable. J'ai la tête assez chaude pour vous mettre en débris, ou prendre votre main. Vous êtes sans défense.

Trop de coquins vous guettent et guettent votre effroi. Vous n'avez d'autre choix que la mélancolie. Le sévère dé-

goût que de bâtir pour eux, de devoir en retour connaître leurs pensées!

J'ai rompu le silence puisque tous sont partis et que vous n'avez rien qu'un bois de pins pour vous. Ah! courez à la route, faites-vous des amis, cœur enfant devenez sous le nuage noir.

Le monde a tant marché depuis votre venue qu'il n'est plus qu'un pot d'os, qu'un vœu de cruauté. O Dame évanouie, servante de hasard, les lumières se rendent où l'affamé les voit.

II

NOTE SUR LE MAQUIS

Montrer le côté hasardeux de l'entreprise, mais avec un art comme à dessein rétrospectif dans sa nouveauté tirée de nos poitrines, dans toute sa vérité ou la sincère approximation de celle-ci. Ce sont les « fautes » de l'ennemi, sa consigne d'humilier avant d'exterminer, qui surtout nous favorisèrent. Sans le travail forcé en Allemagne, les persécutions, la contamination et les crimes, un petit nombre de jeunes gens seulement aurait pris le Maquis et les armes. *La France de 1940 ne croyait pas, chez elle, à la cruauté ni à l'asservissement.* (*) De plus l'énigme de l'année 39-40 pesait sur son insouciance de la veille comme une chape de plomb.

Contrairement à l'opinion avancée, le courage du désespoir fait peu d'adeptes. Une poignée d'hommes solitaires, jusqu'en 1942, tenta d'engager de près le combat. Le merveilleux est que cette cohorte disparate composée d'enfants trop choyés et mal aguerris, d'individualistes à tous crins, d'ouvriers par tradition soulevés, de croyants généreux, de

(*) Celle de 1954, pas davantage!

garçons ayant l'exil du sol natal en horreur, de paysans au patriotisme fort obscur, d'imaginatifs instables, d'aventuriers précoces voisinant avec les vieux chevaux de retour de la Légion Etrangère, les leurrés de la guerre d'Espagne; ce conglomerat fut sur le point de devenir entre les mains d'hommes intelligents et clairvoyants un extraordinaire verger comme la France n'en avait connu que quatre ou cinq fois dans son histoire et sur son sol. Mais quelque chose, qui était hostile, ou simplement étranger à cette espérance, survint alors et la rejeta dans le néant. Par crainte d'un mal dont les pouvoirs devaient justement s'accroître du temps mort laissé par cet abandon!

Pour élargir, jusqu'à la lumière, la lueur sous laquelle s'agite, entreprend, souffre et subsiste l'homme, il faut l'aborder sans préjugés, allégée d'archétypes qui subitement sans qu'on en soit averti, cessent d'avoir cours. Pour obtenir un résultat valable de quelque action que ce soit, il est nécessaire de la dépouiller de ses inquiètes apparences, des sortilèges et des légendes que l'imagination lui accorde déjà avant de l'avoir menée, de concert avec l'esprit et les circonstances, à bonne fin, de distinguer la vraie de la fausse ouverture par laquelle on va filer vers le futur. L'observer nue et la proue face au Temps. L'évidence, qui n'est par sensation mais regard que nous croisons au passage, s'offre souvent à nous, à demi dissimulée. Nous désignerons la Beauté partout où elle aura une chance de survivre à l'espèce d'interim qu'elle paraît assurer au milieu de nos soucis. Faire longuement rêver ceux qui ordinairement n'ont pas de songes, et plonger dans l'actualité ceux dans l'esprit desquels prévaut la chance du sommeil.

(1943-1946)

GEORGES BATAILLE

L'ÊTRE INDIFFÉRENCIÉ N'EST RIEN

I

*Chapeau
de feutre
de la mort
le givre
la sœur
d'un sanglot
gai*

*la blancheur
de la mer
et la pâleur de la lumière
déroberont les ossements*

*l'absence
de la mort
sourit.*

II

*Le corps
du délit
est le cœur
de ce délire.*

III

*Les lois de la saveur
assiègent
la tour de la luxure.*

IV

*L'alcool
de la poésie
est le silence
défunt.*

V

*J'ai vomi
par le nez
le ciel arachnéen
mes tempes amenuisées
achèvent de l'amincir
je suis mort
et les lis
évalurent l'eau distillée*

*les mots manquent

et je manque enfin.*

VI

Les mots du poème, leur indocilité, leur nombre, leur insignifiance, retiennent sur le cœur l'instant impalpable, baiser lentement appuyé sur la bouche d'une morte, ils suspendent le souffle à ce qui n'est plus rien.

La transparence de l'être aimé, miraculeuse indifférence, ce qui égare, égaré dans le cristal innombrable de la lumière: n'y penser jamais plus.

VII

*L'éclair tue
retourne les yeux
la joie
efface
la joie*

*effacée
vitre de mort
glacée
ô vitre
resplendissante
d'un éclat qui se brise
dans l'ombre qui se fait*

*je suis
ce qui n'est pas
j'ouvre
les dents mêlées
des morts
et les grincements de la lumière
qui m'enivre
de l'étreinte
qui s'étouffe
de l'eau
qui pleure
de l'air mort
et de l'âme de l'oubli*

*mais rien
je ne vois
rien
je ne ris plus
car à force de rire
je transparais.*

JEAN CAYROL

LE MIROIR DE LA MISÈRE

*Dans la nuit
on ne construit rien,
toute fumée noire
vient du bois d'un mort,
toute flamme
d'un feu cassé.*

*Dans le froid
on n'aime plus rien
qu'un lit de roseaux,
un ventre de chien
et l'étrange boule de pain
de la lune,*

*Dans la chaude crasse
on n'attend plus rien.*

*Tout le bleu du ciel
est sur la chair
comme une trace
qui ne s'en va qu'avec vos mains.*

TERRE PRÉSENTE

*Terre de gerbes, de colère,
buste noiraud du soleil
dans les mailles du vent matois tu perds
tes frères cassettes de morts.*

*Ecoute le maillet du temps
qui tape sur ton silence!*

*Terre qui prend saveur dans l'offense,
qui prend époux dans le sang fort
et dont le corps
a la livide odeur de l'olivier battu.*

*Terre ma fine fleur du feu,
dont la tête a blanchi dès le commencement,
tu joins tes mains, tes herbes et tes ombres
sur un ventre douloureux.*

*Ma terre comme un nœud qu'on écrase
et qu'on ne peut défaire,
tu broies en farine légère
les vivants devant ta case.*

*Terre dont les entrailles
sont un furieux panier de crabes
d'armes mortes et de rables:
ça grouille et ça ferraille
ça rouille et ça couraille,
qui oubliera l'entrée tranchante de ta paix?*

*Terre dont les pieds nus
font remuer la mer avec ses océans
(dans l'établi de la lune, j'entends des pas menus)
et dont l'empreinte est un gisant
qui grésille au soleil cru
et dont les plaies tombent comme des noix tendres
quand il a plu.*

*Terre toujours entière et jamais partagée
et pour chacun restant totalité.
Terre d'or à midi
et d'argent dans le répit
et de bronze dans le cri
et de plume dans le nid.*

*Terre qui s'allume et qui s'éteint
comme un feu de coréen
et qui fait son brasier sur une flaque d'eau,
dans la feuillée d'une prière
et dans les soupiraux
de la misère.*

*Terre, ma vieille molaire
quand le nerf touche la peau.
Rapproche le fils et le père
dans la seigneurie des oiseaux.*

*Qui prendra ta placide paire d'aurores
ton attelage sans essieu
quel aiguillon fera crier ta mort
et son baluchon fabuleux?*

*Terre, mon corps hilare
quand ton soleil va rouler sur d'autres épaules
quand le hasard
pris de boisson
cherche à nouveau d'innocentes paroles.*

*Qui te prendra les morts qui n'ont plus cours,
ta vieille pomme d'incendie,
ton jardin passé à l'amour
et sa Nouvelle et ses on-dits?*

*Dis, que fais-tu ma terre, tête nue,
dans la nuée plus huée que l'église
et dans la larme qui se crut
terre promise?*

*Terre décapitée, O mon sol débité
comme tronc
dans la forêt
comme poisson
de la marée!*

*Qui remettra tes hommes dans leurs plis,
qui redira: j'aime la bonhommie
et l'œuf mollet
et l'amour qui n'a pas de tamis
et le haut feu des coqs dans la mêlée
et les volets véhéments de la nuit
et les pas lourds et gloutons de la pluie?*

*Qui redira: j'aime
ces grands coups sourds du rêve*

*qui se replie
 et l'arbre bohémien et ceux qui font la grève
 pour un épi
 et le lézard époux dans les broussailles
 et le vent tout brûlant d'anciens cous
 et la taille
 immuable des guêpes et la liberté qui s'échoue
 et tout ce qui fait soleil dans la ripaille
 et le réveil qui trotte sur la joue?*

*Terre où es ta tête qui flambe dans le levant
 et que le fleuve emporte comme Orphée rougissant
 et que la fille étouffe sous les draps
 et que la guerre attire à ses repas,*

terre qui a mal à son soleil

*terre qui s'en va
 jusqu'à n'être plus qu'un point
 sur la terre
 et disparaît
 dans les foins brûlés
 du mystère.*

RENÉ CAZELLES

POÈMES

PROLOGUE

J'étais entré dans les pays de la dissidence. A mesure que j'y avançais s'estompait le visage brumeux et aimé de la planète tandis qu'au loin, ruisselant de boue, émergeait l'immense dos des nuits. Leurs ailes m'entouraient déjà lorsque je parvins aux portes béantes de la cloche des eaux; tout à l'entour, des plantes embryonnaires, me sembla-t-il, s'efforçaient dans une dernière et morne tentative d'accouplement. Au delà s'étendait l'incommensurable secret. J'interrogeais: d'où viens-tu fleuve magnifique et cruel? tout doit-il donc progresser implacablement vers sa ruine? Pourquoi m'éblouir si ce n'est que pour accroître l'obscurité à l'intérieur de moi? Mais rien ne pouvait surgir du temps ou de l'espace évanouis comme de simple fictions, fondus en un seul et même sifflement continu, interminablement; rien d'autre que l'inscrutable matière du vide. La solitude et la peur m'envahirent. Je voulus faire du feu pour avoir un compagnon. Il s'éteignit. Je compris que là s'arrêtait la lumière, que là s'accomplissait l'horrible songe dans l'asphyxie et le délire. Là s'arrêtait la vie, ce déchirant bonheur auquel je consentis alors de toute mon âme.

LA JUSTICE VÉRITABLE

J'étais protégé ou je croyais l'être. Le malheur, pensais-je, tarira sous mon propre abîme. L'ombre tournera. Confiant je dénouais la douceur du monde que tu allais m'apporter

toi qui est harmonie, qui est beauté. Cette chambre, ce cœur je les avais remplis de ta lumière qui se mouvait comme la première brise de l'aube et pénétrait mon sang goutte après goutte. Dans l'air élargi scintillait la récolte du lendemain, ton écharpe nuageuse. Désormais de chaque fleur naîtrait un fruit. Toi qui fût pressentiment dans mon enfance, espoir plus tard et tourments à présent.

Avec un peu de chance nous nous serions maintenus sous le harcèlement de la pluie et les afflications passagères. Nous serions allés vivre près de la mer, à l'écart des villes, sous la sauvegarde de sa fécondité. Nous aurions traversé toutes les forêts pour parvenir au dernier sommet parmi les pierres et les myrtilles. Et de là, n'acceptant plus que le silence, participant enfin au grand éveil de la clarté, nous nous serions lentement acheminé vers la perfection de toutes choses, jusqu'à ce que s'efface le chant secret de notre accord et qu'il renaisse dans le cercle d'un nouveau visage.

AURORE DES JOURS TRISTES

Là-bas brille une lampe qui n'existe plus, aurore des jours tristes, légère fumée qui mouille encore mes yeux.

Quelques oiseaux nous avaient devancés parmi les rocs et l'onde sauvage. Herbes, villages, collines, tout criait notre nom, tout s'offrait à nous dans la plénitude du matin. Il faisait beau. Nous étions sans défense. La terre tendrement souriait de notre jeune bonheur. Et brusquement nous n'avions plus eu besoin de preuves ni du temps. Accrochés aux vents, rapprochés par notre commune fatigue nous nous étions l'un l'autre longuement échangés.

Nous ne savions pas que nous allions grandir dans les rides d'un cœur vieux déjà couvert comme d'une maladie par la maigre fleur des murailles.

Que sont devenus nos lignes dans l'obscur commerce des nuits?

Tu demeuras au pli de l'horizon guettant une hypothétique délivrance. Je devins l'infidèle. J'habitais la ville.

Là-bas brille une lampe qui n'existe plus, frêle clarté défaite, perdue, front découronné dont je n'ai rien sauvé.

ICI-BAS

Afin que cesse la misérable raison du joug je brûle l'effigie, je comble l'intervalle, je déborde les ruines. L'étoile nouvelle qui devait venir habiter ma croisée, ce mauvais présage s'éloigne. Réapparaît la fougère géante qui dévore et nourrit.

Ainsi placé sous la protection de l'ancêtre au visage baigné de larmes, au cœur rongé par l'épouvante mais qui croyait en ses fils quelque part survivants, j'appelle joie le geste de la branche chargée de fruits, bonheur l'ombre qu'à chaque printemps porte mon vieux champ d'amandiers.

Mon amère liberté est celle-là même de ce nuage qui passe et s'enfonce sous la face noire de la mer.

Vie et mort ne s'opposent que pour mieux s'unir, vie et mort sont les deux faces de mes concerts désespérément ensoleillés.

Ma maison n'est plus obscure. Elle n'est qu'un toit contre les intempéries. Elle a autant de fenêtres que la rivière a de gués, autant de caprices que le jardins a de fleurs.

Le désir d'être dépouillé du désir de durer.

Peut-être une fois atteindrai-je la coïncidence, l'étroite lumière de soufre qui me liera définitivement à la terre. Le point invisible mais réel d'où partent et où s'achèvent les lignes de force.

Que j'épouse l'audace de mon amour qui seul revivra!

La barque d'herbes des fleuves dérive lentement vers les sables bleus. Un oiseau sur la proue chante le bouquet d'écume qui l'attend.

LA PLUS GANDE DIMENSION

Les trois sommets du triangle sont le taureau à tête d'homme, la vierge aux pieds d'argent, la couronne de cendres. Leur somme est cette trêve inespérée.

A MÊME LE SOL

La pluie, qui, la veille encore, décimait les jours et nous tenait enfermés, vient de finir. Nous sommes sortis dans la nuit. Tout n'était pas neuf, mais tout était nouveau. Un dernier souffle ridait à peine la surface endormie du plateau. Le pas mécanique du marcheur s'était tu, vieillard emporté par les eaux. Au petit matin nous pûmes discerner le ciel qui se courbait sous le souffle pur de la mer. Puis nous nous étendîmes, solitaires et unis, sous la grande pacification du soleil.

VIVETTE PERRET

LES MARIÉS

Je ne connaissais pas ma cousine Renée. Pourquoi ma tante Claire m'invita-t-elle au mariage de sa fille? Peut-être parcequ'une demoiselle d'honneur manquait au cortège, ou, pour ne fâcher personne, m'avait-elle élue pour représenter la branche parisienne de la famille? Bref, j'étais invitée. Et ma mère reçut un coupon d'organdi à fleurs pour ma robe.

Je laisse à penser quelle fût mon agitation pendant cette semaine-là. En rentrant de l'école, je trouvais ma mère affairée au milieu des chiffons. J'essayais la grande robe froncée, et ma mère nouait autour de moi un ruban de velours gros bleu qu'elle attachait avec des épingles. Les ciseaux froids glissaient sur mon cou, sous mes bras. J'étais piquée, pincée, on me faisait tourner d'un bout à l'autre de la salle.

— Rentre donc ton ventre! On verra les baleines.

Car, à douze ans, maigre à faire peur, n'ayant pas plus de chair entre la peau et les os qu'un lapin écorché, je portais un corset. Un vrai corset avec des lacets noués en paquets par derrière, et des baleines qui pointaient sous mes jupes.

Enfin, la robe échancrée, arrondie, ourlée, et amidonnée fut pliée dans un carton des Galeries Lafayette, et je pris toute seule le train pour X, petite ville de la Loire où vivaient nos cousins. Ma mère agita une dernière fois son mouchoir, me cria quelque chose que je n'entendis pas. J'étais partie.

Je pensai à l'école qui devait ouvrir ses portes, à la classe d'histoire où je n'étais pas... au château où j'allais arriver. Car, on me l'avait assuré, c'était bien au château que se passerait la fête. Le père de la mariée, mon oncle Charles, était régisseur du marquis de T., et ce marquis possédait un château, classé monument historique, dont on n'avait montré les photos dans un grand livre relié. Cela tenait du miracle, cette histoire de château, de parc et de marquis, et, à vrai dire, je n'y croyais guère. Mes pensées allaient surtout aux mariés. J'essayais de me rappeler les mariages auxquels, de près ou de loin j'avais pu assister. Mais ils étaient si différents les uns des autres, que je ne savais pas si celui de ma cousine ressemblerait à celui de mon frère, ou plutôt à la noce de Rose Corgier, la bouchère. Mais je penchais pour une fête comme personne n'en avait encore vue chez nous, et il me semblait voir, sur les fils électriques qui montaient et descendaient devant la vitre du wagon, des personnages déguisés et charmants danser au son d'un orchestre composé de trouvères gratant des vielles et chantant. Il faut dire que j'avais sommeil, et que, à ce cours d'histoire que j'avais manqué, nous étions en plein Roman de la Rose, amour courtois et mystères. Tandis que je me laissais ainsi bercer par le train, j'aurais trouvé tout naturel que ma cousine Renée s'appelât Nicolette ou Blanchefleur, et que la noce se passât à cheval, dans une forêt de Maupertuis fourmillante de faucons, d'Ysengrins et de chevaliers à poulaines.

C'est à ce point de ma rêverie que le train s'arrêta brusquement à Orléans. Il ne me fallut qu'un instant, en passant par Jeanne d'Arc, pour me retrouver à ce printemps-ci, petite fille vêtue d'un corset qui n'appartenait à aucune autre époque, et déçue. Je me pelotonnai à nouveau dans mon coin, éprouvant le sentiment qu'il fallait me méfier à présent. Je voyais le quai de la gare, les porteurs avec leur courroie de cuir sur le ventre. Depuis toujours, il en était ainsi avec mes rêves: une secousse, un bruit, et je me trouvais assise en face de gens laids qui portaient des courroies sur le ventre.

Le train se remit en marche. Cette fois, il fallait penser aux vrais mariages. A celui de mon frère Paul, par exemple, que j'avais vu de mes propres yeux, chez nous, quand nous habitions encore dans la Manche. Je n'avais guère que sept ou huit ans, alors, et je me souviens que mon père annonça un soir au dîner que mon frère Paul était fiancé. Nous étions tous autour de la table. La soupière fumait. Ma mère resta un moment immobile, tenant en tremblant un peu la louche remplie de soupe au-dessus de mon assiette. Puis, le pain trempé tomba, comme un gros caillou dans une flaque, en éclaboussant la table. L'odeur du poireau me parut déplacée. Il me semblait qu'on aurait dû nous servir, ce soir là, un potage ou un consommé, comme on voit écrit en lettres dorées sur les menus des repas de fiançaille.

Mais la jeune fille n'était pas là. Je pensais à la dictée que j'avais faite en classe, où les arbres en fleurs étaient comparés à des bouquets de fiancée. « Fiancée » était-il au singulier ou au pluriel ? Je ne le sais pas encore. Mais, avec ou sans « s », comme j'imaginai bien la jeune fille qui allait venir ! Pieds nus, vêtue de voiles, tenant à la main cet arbre en fleurs qu'elle aurait cueilli en passant, dans le champ aux pommes ou dans le jardin de l'instituteur. Paul était rouge. Une de mes sœurs ricanna. Une autre lui poussa le coude. Mon père mangeait sans rien dire, aspirant avec bruit le bouillon, parce que c'était de la soupe. Quand la jeune fille serait venue, quand on apporterait le consommé, je savais bien que mon père le ferait doucement glisser dans sa gorge, au-dessus de sa serviette tendue sur son gilet comme un drap de fête-Dieu, en tenant sa cuillère de côté, comme je l'avais vu faire à ma tante Louise qui habitait Paris. La fiancée serait assise à côté de lui, avec ses longs cheveux, son arbre en fleurs, sa bague. Elle ne mangerait pas. Elle serait exactement placée dans cette ligne de soleil brillante qui coupe en deux la table, à midi, venue du jardin à travers les deux montants écartés des volets. Le soleil ne pourrait pas manquer d'être là, puisque l'arbre serait là, au soleil, comme toujours.

— Mange ta soupe. Elle va refroidir.

J'écrasais contre ma langue le pain mouillé comme une éponge, le bouillon giclait dans ma bouche.

— Pourquoi vous parlez de Marie?

Les autres se mirent à rire.

— Tu n'as donc pas entendu ce qu'a dit Papa?

— Elle est toujours dans la lune.

— De qui veux-tu qu'on parle, alors?

Ma mère emportait la soupière.

— Marie s'entendra bien au ménage.

Marie! Je ne comprenais pas encore. Allait-elle tenir la maison des fiancés, cette noiraude?

J'attendis longtemps l'arrivée de la belle fiancée, le repas de fête, l'arbre en fleurs...

Paul partit un soir de noces, une petite valise à la main, en tenant sa femme par la taille. Nous étions serrés devant une fenêtre pour assister au départ. Je m'étais glissée au premier rang. Les autres se penchaient au-dessus de moi. La balustrade m'écrasait la poitrine. De mon frère aîné, je ne me rappelle guère que cette silhouette un peu penchée qui s'éloignait, tenant d'une main une valise, de l'autre une femme, et, je ne sais comment, nous faisant un grand signe d'adieu. J'entends aussi quelqu'un dire, au-dessus de ma tête: « Le voilà chargé de famille ».

Pauvre Paul! Comme tout cela semblait lourd, en effet. Je pensais à l'âne chargé de sel ou à l'âne chargé d'éponges. Allait-il pouvoir traverser la rivière? Étaient-ce des éponges ou du sel qui emplissaient la petite valise? Mon Dieu! Voilà Marie qui se retournait! Comme la femme de Loth, elle allait être changée en statue de sel. Je voyais bien son tailleur blanc devenir plus rigide, granuleux, il suffirait de frotter un peu Marie, du bout du doigt, pour assaisonner le consommé de volaille, le gigot pré-salé. Mais il est vrai que le repas était terminé. Maintenant, Marie allait fondre. Paul ne serait pas noyé.

Quand les autres se furent enfin éloignés de la fenêtre, je gardai longtemps la barre de fer du balcon dans ma poitrine.

Elle sortit peu à peu, en marquant ma robe d'une ligne noire que ma mère aperçut vite, frappa de la main en bougonnant : « Elle aurait pu resservir ».

A quoi donc, à quoi donc encore ? Comme j'avais sommeil ! On m'envoya au lit. En passant, j'attrapai les deux petits mariés de sucre oubliés sur la table, tombés du gâteau sur la nappe. Quand je fus en chemise, je les serrais toujours dans ma main. J'entendis vaguement le bruit des verres qu'on emportait, de la vaisselle qu'on empilait sur l'évier, sur le carreau, dans la bassine... Je dus m'endormir.

Du lendemain de la fête, je me rappelais encore mon réveil, ma main poisseuse, les poupées disparues, fondues... Mais était-ce donc là tout ce que je pouvais dire du mariage de mon frère ? En somme, j'avais oublié. C'était comme si Paul ne s'était jamais marié, comme s'il attendait toujours l'autre, la fée.

Quant à la noce de la fille Corgier, ce fut une autre affaire. Nous étions arrivés au village dans une vieille voiture qui était sans doute celle du boucher venu nous chercher à la gare de La Croix-Nicelle. Je ne sais plus très bien où se trouvait ce village là, mais il est certain qu'il était situé dans un pays montagneux, car la route en lacets, l'odeur de la voiture échauffée par la pente, m'avaient donné mal au cœur, effet que produisait encore sur moi la seule vue d'un boucher. Il est vrai que j'eus d'autres raisons, pas plus tard que le matin même de la noce, d'être écœurée par ce boucher là. Mais j'en parlerai tout à l'heure. Le fait est que sur la route qui nous conduisait au village, j'avais beau répéter, autant que je pouvais ouvrir la bouche pour parler :

— Arrêtez, Monsieur Bresson, arrêtez...

Le boucher n'en continuait pas moins de virer, en disant :

— On arrive, petite !

Et je dois bien avouer qu'il avait raison, puisque nous eûmes le temps d'arriver jusqu'à la place, et que ce n'est que lorsqu'il eût ouvert la portière que je jaillis hors de la voiture en vomissant, juste à l'instant où madame Tabarot, l'épicière, s'écriait pour nous accueillir :

— Eh! Vous arrivez juste à temps pour la noce!

Rose Corgier allait épouser le boucher le lendemain.

Elle était là, d'ailleurs, regardant la voiture qu'elle avait dû guetter sur la route, cette auto qui lui appartenait presque, avec sa belle pancarte *VIANDES*, et que, je ne sais pourquoi, dans le village, on appelait la *Cottin*. C'est qu'il n'y avait pas encore beaucoup de gens possédant une automobile dans cette montagne, et celle-ci servait à la fois de taxi, de voiture de déménagement de char à banc pour les noces, et aussi de corbillard, quand les familles étaient assez riches pour s'offrir la *Cottin*, au lieu de balancer à bout de bras leur mort à travers les prés, depuis la ferme jusqu'à l'église, et de l'église à la porte du cimetière. Voilà que je pensais aux enterrements la veille du mariage de Rose! Mais il y avait bien une raison à cela.

Mes jambes étaient encore tremblantes; mes joues glacées par le mal de cœur n'avaient pas encore retrouvé leurs couleurs, et je regardais Rose, sa grosse figure si rouge qu'elle me faisait penser aux rôtis saignants pendus aux crochets de la boutique, et dont on éloignait les mouches à l'aide de guirlandes voltigeant au vent de je ne sais quelle soufflerie mécanique. Ses mains ressemblaient aussi à des beefsteaks dentelés écrasés d'un bon coup plat de hachette, et ses chevilles aux pieds de veau veinés de bleus qui trempaient toujours dans un plat, avec les oreilles, le museau, et les gros yeux bleus des vaches.

Le boucher rentra enfin la *Cottin* dans sa remise, et nous nous dirigeâmes vers notre maison. De la cour on pouvait voir, par-dessus la maison du charpentier Balaguy — celui-là même qui fabriquait tant de cercueils — au bas d'un grand pré où croupissaient des mares, la ferme des Corgier. Pour rien au monde, je ne serais allée toute seule de ce côté. L'histoire d'un cousin mort après trois jours d'une maladie terrible qu'il avait attrappée en se baignant dans une de ces mares, le nombre de reptiles qu'on trouvait chaque jour dans ces prés, et qui n'étaient peut-être que des couleuvres, mais qui m'effrayaient quand-même, la forêt qui commençait tout de suite

derrière la ferme, si sombre qu'il y faisait, disait-on, nuit en plein jour, les chiens qu'on entendait sans cesse aboyer après les vaches, tout, du côté de cette maison, me faisait si peur que je ne pouvais regarder par là sans trembler. Sans compter le père Corgier lui-même, dont je ne me rappelle qu'une paire de bretelles jaunes tendue à craquer sur son ventre, et dont on disait qu'il buvait et qu'il faisait des dettes.

Je dus dormir, cette nuit-là, comme les autres fois, dans la chambre du grenier qu'on appelait le dortoir aux filles, et que mes sœurs et moi nous devions balayer tous les matins avec un grand balai de fougères, après avoir dessiné, avec l'eau d'un arrosoir, des huites sur le plancher de sapin. La chambre gardait jusqu'au soir son odeur de poussière mouillée dont nous laissions des paquets grumeleux derrière la porte, au coin des murs, et sans doute sous nos lits.

Mais le lendemain était le jour de la noce, et nous avions tant de connaissances à renouer avant la fête, que nous dûmes abandonner le balai et la poussière pour courir sur la place du village. Le boucher était déjà là, mais, à mon grand étonnement, il était, comme toujours, en blouse et en tablier à carreaux, et il faisait descendre un gros bœuf de sa voiture, en le tirant par la longe. Nous suivions nous aussi, formant déjà une sorte de cortège, le cœur un peu soulevé avant même de savoir très bien pourquoi, tandis que la bête poussait des meuglements qui nous emplissaient la tête, et balançait devant nous une grosse queue couverte de mouches.

Le boucher fit tourner la bête, de telle sorte qu'elle nous regardait maintenant, et quand elle souleva ses énormes paupières, ils me sembla voir, à travers ma frayeur qui les grossissait comme une loupe, les yeux bleus de Rose, la mariée, posés sur moi.

Je ne garde après cela qu'un souvenir confus de la mort du bœuf. Et tout se mêla par la suite dans ma tête, l'allée de l'église où le curé avait cloué un tapis rouge, les rigoles sanglantes de la remise du boucher, les linges blancs qu'il avait tachés en s'essuyant les mains, le voile de Rose qui fai-

ait paraître plus éclatantes encore ses deux joues, ses mains croisées sur sa robe, et ses chevilles qu'on apercevait sur les marches, pendant qu'elle attendait pour la photographie, et que le boucher, en nous lançant des sous, chassait les mouches attirées vers lui par l'odeur du sang.

De cette noce là, je me souviens aussi du curé discourant dans la chaire, mais j'ai peut-être confondu le sermon du mariage avec ceux qu'il prononçait aux autres messes, car il ne semble étrange qu'il ait ce jour là prié pour les morts, comme je crois l'entendre encore, récitant d'une seule traite et sans reprendre une fois son souffle, le nom de tous les morts de l'année, en faisant rouler les « r » : Jean Balaguy Marie Bresson femme Place Blanche Tabarot femme Bouvier Marie Morgier, et terminant dans un dernier murmure essoufflé : « Priez pour eux ! »

Il y eut bien aussi le départ deux par deux pour la ferme, les rires que nous entendîmes longtemps de chez nous, après que le cortège eut longé la mare où mon petit cousin avait attrapé sa fièvre, et disparu au bas du grand pré aux serpents. Puis, tard dans la nuit, le bruit du bal, et celui que faisait la *Cottin* qu'on devait mettre en marche, à grands coups de manivelle, et où j'imaginais que la mariée allait s'asseoir, dans une grande flaque de sang.

C'est alors que le train entra sous la verrière de la gare de X, et je vis tout de suite que le mariage de ma cousine Renée ne ressemblerait en rien à celui de Rose Bresson.

Mon oncle Charles m'attendait devant la gare, assis tout droit dans une petite voiture à cheval si jolie que je crus, en m'asseyant à côté de lui sur le siège, que tout cela, le poil brillant du cheval, le canotier de mon oncle, ses gants noirs fixés aux poignets par deux boutons-pressions, n'existait pas, et que j'allais encore une fois m'éveiller, secouée par le cahotement du wagon. Mais mon oncle tira sur les rênes et se tourna vers moi en disant :

— Alors, petite, on vient danser ?

Danser ! Il y aurait donc un bal, et j'allais danser ! Je regardais mon oncle en souriant, trop étonnée encore pour

parler. Sa moustache, et son pince-nez relié à son gilet par un cordon, tremblaient au trot du cheval. Son veston noir était si bien ajusté qu'il me semblait que, sous son faux-croisé empesé, mon oncle cachait le crochet doré d'un porte-manteau en bois verni. La route devint bientôt une rue pavée, et après un dernier tournant, nous franchîmes la porte du parc et le cheval se mit au pas dans une allée sablée au bout de laquelle, par une trouée percée dans les arbres, j'aperçus le château. Le cheval s'arrêta devant une maison à tourelle où habitait mon oncle.

— Monte, ma fille. Pour moi, je vais rentrer la voiture.

Je restai devant l'escalier, n'osant pas monter. Tout était sombre, un froid humide tombait de cette tour sur mes épaules. J'aurais voulu courir après mon oncle, rester avec lui dans l'odeur du cheval, du bois verni et du cuir des rênes. Mais il fallait bien entrer.

Il ne semblait y avoir, dans la maison silencieuse, aucune allée et venue, aucun préparatif de fête. Je poussai la porte d'une salle, et je vis cinq fillettes assises autour d'une table et vetues de cette même étoffe dont était faite ma robe de demoiselle d'honneur. Je pense que nous serions restées là jusqu'au soir, à nous regarder sans rien dire, si ma tante n'était entrée à ce moment là dans la pièce. Elle me vit, et dit :

— Mais c'est notre petite cousine.

Puis elle me prit des mains mon grand carton, et m'entraîna à travers des couloirs, dans une chambre obscure dont la fenêtre était bouchée par des branches.

— Mets ta robe.

Je m'habillai, puis ma tante me conduisit à nouveau dans la salle et, me montrant une chaise, elle me dit :

— Joue.

Je m'aperçus que mes cousines jouaient aux cartes. Elles tenaient leur paquet de cartes à la main, et chacune à son tour en posait une sur la table. On me donna un paquet semblable et le jeu étrange dont je ne connaissais pas la règle continua. Mes cousines portaient toutes des nattes enroulées autour de

leurs têtes; elles étaient pâles. J'appris plus tard qu'elles s'appelaient Marthe, ou Solange, et encore d'autres noms de ce genre que j'ai oubliés. Elles avaient une façon de pencher un peu la tête, comme si leur cou eût été trop faible pour la soutenir, et qu'à la place de sang, un ennui filandreux eût coulé dans leurs veines. Mais je laissai là mes pauvres cousines. Je ne pensai plus qu'au bal. Un peu plus tard, j'entendis parler de la grande pelouse qui s'étendait devant le château, et je ne doutai pas que le bal aurait lieu dans le parc, à la lumière des lampions, et qu'un grand orchestre allait arriver.

La journée passa lentement. La mariée eut son cortège, sa photographie entourée des six cousines, dont cinq portaient en plus du bouquet, des rubans gros-bleu et d'une bourse du même velours, une paire de nattes bien tirées sur leur tête. Comme je m'ennuyai pendant ce fameux jour de fête! Les gens traînaient dans les allées du parc. On n'allait pas du côté du château, de peur de déranger les chatelains. Mais tout cela n'était rien, puisqu'il y aurait le bal.

Le soir, on en parla enfin. La danse aurait lieu je ne sais où, en dehors de la ville. Il fallait des voitures. Quelqu'un dit qu'on ne tiendrait jamais, qu'il allait manquer une auto.

— Eh bien! nous prendrons le cheval, nous autres! dit mon oncle Charles.

Et peut-être parceque le cheval lui fit penser à sa dernière course, à la gare où il m'avait attendu, mon oncle me regarda et cligna de l'œil sous son lorgnon.

De plaisir, le sang me monta au visage. Pourquoi les cousines étaient-elles si pâles? Dehors, j'entendais déjà rouler les voitures, hennir le cheval qu'on devait atteler.

C'est alors que ma tante Claire se tourna vers nous.

— Montez vite, les filles, et sans bruit!

Ce dernier conseil était inutile. Mes cousines se levèrent et sortirent en rang de la salle. Ma tante me dit:

— Eh bien, qu'est-ce que tu attends? Monte.

Je suivis les autres. Je suppose qu'elles ôtèrent soigneusement leur robe de fête, leur jupon, leur corset et leurs bas

de fil blancs. Je suppose qu'elles firent leur prière, à genoux sur la carpeite. Je suppose qu'elles croisèrent leurs mains par-dessus le drap, et firent leur examen de conscience, après avoir déroulé leurs nattes. Pour moi, des larmes de rage m'aveuglaient. Je restai assise dans la chambre noire. J'écoutai rire ceux qui partaient pour la fête. J'entendis s'éloigner d'abord les voitures, puis la petite voiture à cheval. Mon oncle Charles avait dû mettre ses gants, il devait tirer sur les rênes en disant, savait-il seulement à qui? « Alors, petite, on va danser? » Je pensai que je n'avais même pas aperçu le marquis.

Je repris le train au petit jour, accompagnée par un cocher. Je me rappelai le mariage de mon frère, celui de Rose, et il me sembla que toujours, il y avait eu un malentendu.

Mes frères et sœurs m'attendaient à la maison. — Raconte!

Je crois que j'inventai une très belle histoire de mariée, de château et de marquis. Mais c'est surtout le bal que je leur racontai. Et ce bal là, mes frères et mes sœurs se rappelleront toute leur vie qu'ils l'ont manqué.

MARYSE LAFONT

MÈRE EXTRÊME

I

*Passante des beaux jours
Tu gardes les étoiles
Tu sais fleurir nos doigts
Tu es le monde évident
Et le chant sans limite
La merveille attendue
Dans l'allégresse du retour*

*Passante des hauts ciels
Ton printemps sans légende
Jaillira des joies assemblées.*

II

*Si tu implores la nuit
Ignore les contraintes
Si la mort est violente
Mesure ton oubli
Pour quel deuil cher été
Ta tête transparente
Tôt couronnée se pose*

*Sur la familière prairie
Pour quelle épine
Pour quel arbre pensif
Pour quelle fleur nouvelle
Voici tout riant du secret
Ma mère qui porte le rameau
Et qui s'incline devant toi
Halte limpide
Fougère dans la promesse
De l'irrésistible clarté.*

ANDRÉ DU BOUCHET

EMPLOIS DE FEU

I

*Je fais éclater le jour
dont la main
me serre*

je respire à sa place

*je ne vois pas
les limites de sa chambre*

désintéressée

*dévidant la route froide
jusqu'à la terre*

je ne sors pas

je suis déjà dehors

*partout où l'œil
pose son homme
et le fait éclater*

une énorme voiture

*qui roule
sur des roues animales
et broute*

*ce n'est pas mon feu
c'est une autre chaleur*

son ciel

où je suis enfermé.

II

*En pleine terre
les portes labourées portant air et fruits
ressac
blé d'orage
sec
le moyeu brûle
je dois lutter contre mon propre bruit
la force de la plaine
que je brasse
et qui grandit
tout à coup un arbre rit
comme la route que mes pas enflamment
comme le couchant durement branché
comme le moteur rouge du vent
que j'ai mis à nu.*

III

Nous sommes dans le feu, — lui, continûment. Il ne s'arrête pas pour nous.

Je ne possède que ce qui est retranché, supprimé. Les lèvres du jour, le champ de pierres, — et ce mur qu'on va baisser pour que la nuit entre.

Les planches du plancher elles-même soufflent, puisqu'elles sont entr'ouvertes. Je suis plongé malgré moi au fond de cette chambre, avec laquelle nous vivons.

Elle me tend quelques minutes de feu.

IV

Je suis debout devant une roue blanche qui s'ouvre au seuil de plusieurs portes. L'air me guette, dans le feu qui reprend et découpe le seuil de cette maison sauvage.

V

Le vent me déforme. Je deviens rugueux, comme la terre.

VI

A la lecture des pas blancs, des arbres nains, des pierres du vent. Je relève plusieurs villages détruits, près de moi, en passant. Et ces monceaux de vent sur lesquels s'étend le froid. En quelques pas, nous étions très haut. Nous sommes aussi patients que la terre.

VII

Et un feu, la nuit, remplace la ville où tu habites, pour plonger et descendre dans l'air même de la nuit, et nous heurter, sans yeux, aux pierres. Je te vois. Je te reconnais, brûlée, comme une glace noire.

Puis mes doigts sont devenus clairs. Le jour a remplacé le feu, l'air rude et blanc sous les plateaux.

Je réfléchis en roulant.

Je ne comprenais pas où tu t'engouffrais, en grandissant. Ton métier. Un énorme feu blanc borde la terre, et devant nous, toujours, la vague que nous traversons.

VIII

*La nuit
sort lourdement de l'air*

le vent

*jusqu'au jour porteur
d'un grand espoir*

*comme un fagot
sans que bougent
les pierres
enchâssées dans leur feu*

je fournis le chemin

le bois et le feu

*et aussi cette lame qui s'ébrèche
dans la saveur des pierres.*

ERRATUM

Les trois poèmes d'André du Bouchet publiés dans le Cahier XII de *Botteghe Oscure* ont été fondus par erreur en un seul texte. Il convient de lire *Poèmes* à la place du titre qui leur a été attribué.

En outre, page 52, l'intervalle entre la quinzième et la seizième ligne est à supprimer. Page 53, onzième ligne, lire: *ferraille*. L'intervalle entre la vingt-et-unième et la vingt-deuxième ligne est également à supprimer. A la dernière ligne, lire: *me modèle*.

ROGER LAPORTE

SOUVENIR DE REIMS

(approches d'un roman)

Et ce que je vis, le Sacré,
soit ma parole.

HÖLDERLIN

...ne parle pas, ne cache pas,
mais fait signe.

HÉRACLITE

Après *Vert comme...* il semble que le roman ait enfin trouvé sa voie et que l'auteur doive seulement se donner la peine de prendre sa plume pour écrire, avec la facilité d'une pothéose après la victoire, le dernier chapitre de son livre, afin de l'offrir au lecteur, en compensation de tant de chapitres médiocres ou exécrables qui l'ont précédé et comme un avant-goût prometteur de l'excellence du deuxième tome de son roman. Mais voilà plus de deux mois que *Vert comme...* est achevé et le dernier chapitre de ce roman n'est toujours pas écrit. Après *Vert comme...* il suffisait, semble-t-il, d'un dernier effort pour atteindre au port mais je n'avais pas encore le droit d'y entrer et il me fallut rebrousser chemin, revenir au premier chapitre laissé inachevé pour écrire *Vert comme...* Or aucune partie de ce roman, même pas le *Bal Trigrance*, ne m'a demandé autant de persévérance que cette tude sur l'Art du roman: j'ai consacré autant d'heures à ce chapitre de dix pages qu'à la première moitié de ce roman. De surcroît je tombai malade et ne pus terminer ce chapitre qu'au début Mai.

La nécessité de me présenter à un concours, un printemps très pluvieux m'empêchant d'aller à la Mortefontaine que j'avais choisie pour motif, l'envie, enfin, de me reposer quelque peu avant de m'attaquer à la dernière difficulté du roman repoussèrent encore le moment d'écrire ce dernier chapitre. Cependant, le secret remords du travail non entrepris, la possibilité, dès que le temps se mettait au beau, d'aller en une heure de route, à la Mortefontaine, m'interdisaient le repos et me retenaient même d'accéder à son seuil : le sentiment de la fatigue.

Lorsque le temps se mettait enfin au beau et qu'ainsi je pouvais aller à la Mortefontaine, et l'impossibilité de me reposer et le refus de travailler se faisaient plus vifs. Alors je décidais brusquement de partir en voyage et, après plusieurs heures de route, lorsque décidément il était trop tard pour faire demi-tour et me rendre sur le motif, je me sentais enfin à l'abri de toute nécessité de travailler et commençais à goûter une tranquillité, certes acquise au prix de la lâcheté de partir de Paris, mais du moins assurée et dont le mieux était de profiter car, loin de la Mortefontaine, tout regret était désormais superflu. Mais de même que, parfois, dès le lendemain de mon départ, le temps de nouveau couvert, comme promettait la suite de mon voyage, de même, sans m'avoir du moins averti par quelque présage que le sursis, qui du reste ne m'avait jamais été accordé, allait être écourté, le devoir de travailler que j'avais cru laisser prisonnier de Paris et retrouver seulement à mon retour de voyage, redevenait impérieusement présent dès le soir de mon départ. Telle est la mésaventure qui m'est advenue à Reims, où nous sommes arrivés à la fin d'une après-midi de Juin.

Lorsque, venant de la « Montagne », nous débouchâmes d'une dernière crête, nous découvrîmes soudain, devant nous et légèrement sur notre droite, la ville de Reims qui s'étendait au loin dans la plaine. Pendant toute la journée, passant par l'Ile de France, nous avons été accueillis et délivrés par sa lumière, d'une pureté si vive, si neuve, si radieuse, que tout d'abord elle fait presque défaillir comme l'accès à la vraie

e. Cependant, discrète et pleine d'humour, elle fait s'écrier : « Que l'air est pur ! », bien que, tel le Dieu d'Israël, on ne la voit jamais face à face. Non point dissimulée pourtant, mais toute offerte et le dehors d'elle-même, éblouissante profusion de jour comme le corps glorieux de la Terre après la mort du soleil en plein midi, elle découvre, sans bavure, chaque arbre de la forêt, chaque rocher de la montagne, toute la terre enfin, dans le sûr repos d'une telle plénitude qu'au-dessus d'un chêne, vu sur un fond de ciel bleu, creuse et blanche la lumière de l'Île de France s'écarte avec tendresse et respect.

Mais, lorsque nous avons soudain aperçu Reims, la lumière s'y pacifiait et commençait à protéger la ville par une lueur d'un léger gris-bleuté, inquiétant et doux comme le sommeil que donnent, dit-on, les fées. Près de l'horizon, les dernières lignes des maisons, d'une terre cuite ici cramoisie, savoureuse comme un bonbon fourré à la framboise, qui plus loin virait au lilas, pour s'ennoblir enfin d'un violet épiscopal, s'offraient au soleil couchant pour le parachèvement d'une suprême cuisson. Ainsi Reims proposait au voyageur un accueil riche de force sereine, mais reposant et dont la réserve témoignait seulement du souci de ne pas importuner et invitait à une vie provinciale, sans distractions, mais sans ennui car ou bien l'occupation la plus agréable serait de n'y rien faire, de s'y promener lentement et en silence, ou bien de s'y consacrer à un long travail comme la création d'un roman. Au centre de la ville, s'offrant à nous de trois-quarts, d'un noir, qui, trop ancien, était devenu d'un gris frileux, s'élevait une église aux tours anormalement peu élevées au-dessus de la nef, bien modeste pour appartenir à l'art gothique, à tel point que je retins un cri de joie et de reconnaissance de la voir enfin, mais non, nulle autre église à l'horizon, deux tours semblables, c'était bien elle et je m'écriai : « La cathédrale ». Nous traversâmes rapidement la ville et nous descendîmes de moto qu'une fois arrivés sur le parvis de Notre-Dame de Reims.

Lorsque, après une longue séparation, on revoit une personne aimée, notre impatience voudrait s'épancher en cri de joie, mais on se sent d'abord aussi emprunté que devant une inconnue et toutes les nouvelles que l'on voulait demander ou donner, nous paraissent soudain évanouies dans l'inintérêt. De même, voyant enfin la cathédrale, je n'éprouvai point aussitôt une admiration aussi grande que je l'espérais. Sans doute, je ne sentais en moi aucun refus, aucune rupture définitive entre mes espérances et la réalité, semblable à celle que je devais éprouver un peu plus tard à Amiens où, bien loin des hautes joies attentives et lentes, embaumant le miel, que décrit Ruskin, je ne trouvai, sans parler d'une « Vierge dorée », noire de suie et souillée d'excréments de pigeons, qu'une cathédrale aux tours hautes mais sans essor à la façade noire sans être vieille, dont les décorations luxuriantes se proposent seulement de décorer, se surajoutent à la pierre ou la découpent à l'emporte-pièce et ainsi la laissent intacte, la condamnent à l'ennui uniforme du ciment armé et se condamnent elles-mêmes à la tristesse de pièces inamovibles d'un feu d'artifice raté. A Reims je ne parvins point d'abord à joindre la réalité à mon attente. Préférant l'art roman à l'art gothique, je gardais cependant une secrète prédilection, encore injustifiée pour Notre-Dame de Reims, dictée sans doute par la sympathie que l'on éprouve pour un être martyrisé, devenu plus cher parce qu'on a failli le perdre et qu'on le sait encore fragile et menacé. Ma prédilection venait surtout de l'aristocratique sonorité bleu-ciel du nom de Reims, vive et assurée comme une exclamation de joie, décisive comme l'attaque du violon dans le concerto en sol de Mozart. En descendant de moto, ce ne fut aucun détail précis mais la cathédrale dans sa totalité, qui me gêna : elle était là, chose parmi les choses, méconnue comme un homme célèbre dans la foule, sans marque éclatante qui la distinguât de la statue équestre de Jeanne d'Arc qui s'élève devant le Palais de Justice, dédaigneuse ou dédaignée, on ne sait, comme si un peintre avait oublié de nimber sa tête pour la faire reconnaître de celles profanes qui l'entourent.

Les passants ne lui prêtent pas plus d'attention qu'au Palais de Justice sur sa gauche ou à la boutique du marchand de cartes postales et souvenirs sur sa droite. Je longeai la cathédrale et tentai de reconnaître les statues des portails. On n'en voyait que le haut car des travaux de consolidation étaient alors accomplis et une palissade interdisait de s'approcher du portail nord et du portail central. Je reconnus cependant nombre de statues, comme celles de la Visitation ou de l'Annonciation, si célèbres, rencontrées si souvent dans maints livres, depuis les manuels scolaires qu'on les croit sans lieu défini, introuvables comme le Saint-Gral et que l'on est tout étonné de les voir pétrifiées dans un unique exemplaire appartenant à une cathédrale déterminée. Assuré de leur existence, je fuis aussitôt le rabâchage de la célébrité, ne leur jetai qu'un coup d'œil et me dirigeai vers le portail Sud. Je n'en connaissais point les statues, à juste titre peu célèbres, car leur cou ou bien immense évoque irrésistiblement une table de La Fontaine, ou bien volumineux et très court les fait paraître basses sur pattes. En outre, tandis qu'au portail central, le sculpteur avait idéalisé les formes humaines pour les rendre dignes d'exprimer le divin, ici, au contraire, il avait rapproché le divin de l'humain par le réalisme du visage, mais n'avait réussi à donner à tel précurseur du Christ, que la rudesse courtaude d'un garçon boucher malgracieux, affublé de surcroît d'une robe de femme. La laideur des statues aurait pu transformer en déception la gêne que j'avais éprouvée en voyant la cathédrale mais je sentais que ces deux sentiments étaient sans rapport. Je traversai la rue pour prendre du recul et mieux voir Notre-Dame de Reims. Mon malaise, dont j'avais été distrait par l'examen des portails, dès que je vis la cathédrale dans son ensemble, se fit encore plus fort qu'à mon arrivée. Sans défense mais inviolable, à portée de main mais intouchable, offerte au regard mais vue avec peine, telle m'apparut la cathédrale, comme si, arrivé devant le Temple, je devais rester au seuil de la Terre Promise.

Cependant le soleil baissait à l'horizon et je pris rapidement quelques photos de la cathédrale. Je fis d'autant plus vite qu'il était grand temps de partir à la recherche d'un hôtel car nous étions tombés à Reims lors de la foire. Grâce à la diligence d'Hélène, une chambre fut trouvée où nous avons juste déposé notre sac avant de retourner à la cathédrale où, cette fois, nous nous sommes décidés à entrer.

De même qu'une personne bien-née, de soi seule, témoigne de sa grandeur par la seule cambrure un peu accusée des épaules, de même grâce à sa voûte, dont l'incurvation s'accroît avec une simplicité à peine dédaigneuse, la nef de la cathédrale, de surcroît assez étroite, nous confondit par sa hauteur que nous n'avions point soupçonnée du dehors. Encore à notre surprise, lentement nous gagnâmes le chœur, et arrivés au niveau de l'autel je me retournai. Par le cheminement de la voûte ombrée d'incantation, mon regard fut conduit à la Rose Ouest dont le rouge, heureux comme l'exaltation d'une note grave de blues, charmé d'un or mûr et gourmand de tournesol, s'épanouissait, avec une lenteur hiératique de lanterne chinoise, en une paix distante parce que simple comme celle d'Héraclite l'obscur près du four à cuire. Alors, d'emblée, me donnant une joie lucide et incisive, comme un essor vers l'immuable matin, précieuse et inattendue comme la grâce accordée au poète de voir la vie elle-même, métamorphosée comme par l'art, la cathédrale même, qui m'était tout d'abord restée si obstinément étrangère, m'accueillit au séjour de la vraie vie, dans la fulguration stable d'un éternel retour.

Joie digne par excellence d'être décrite, mais sans rapport avec les autres joies de la vie, si ce n'est avec celle, sacrée, de faire l'amour avec une femme aimée, comparable seulement aux autres joies de l'art, elle désespère le poète dès qu'il se change en philosophe et veut l'atteindre dans sa source de lumière comme en dehors et avant sa manifestation. Si le philosophe se demande pourquoi l'éclat rouge du vitrail lui donne une telle joie, aussitôt le rouge se réduit à une couleur, le vitrail à du verre et sa joie, même pas rebelle

mais étrangère à l'analyse, lui devient incompréhensible, et se nargue car elle semble se cacher derrière la Rose, au-delà de la Cathédrale. Mais le poète apprend au philosophe qu'il est vain de chercher la source de la lumière car elle est à elle-même sa propre source, n'existe que par son illumination et qu'elle est le rouge même, mais sorti des limbes, érigé à toute puissance d'un vitrail, lumière noire comme l'éclatante musique sourde d'un pays muet.

Il fallut pourtant s'arracher à cette vision où soudain la vie, glorieusement simple comme celle d'un paradis terrestre retrouvé, avait pris sens et était digne d'être vécue pour retourner à la vie quotidienne, ennuyeuse et anonyme comme une chambre d'hôtel. Aussi, lentement, nous descendîmes par le bas-côté Nord, nous sortîmes de la cathédrale et partîmes à la recherche d'un restaurant. Après souper, nous sommes retournés à la cathédrale, et nous nous sommes assis sur un banc du square qui s'ouvre devant le Palais de Justice.

La cathédrale. Quel calme! Grave et serein tel celui d'un paysan, le soir, après la moisson. Quel calme! Fort, large et doux comme une prière qui ferme les paupières. Abolie l'horreur de l'ennui, repos sans mauvaise conscience, tel le réconfort, jaune comme le chant du miel, donné par l'épaule de la femme aimée. Un ouvrier à bicyclette traverse le parvis. Il tourne à droite, prend la rue qui longe la cathédrale, puis tourne à gauche sans même lui avoir jeté un coup d'œil. Je me sens blessé comme d'une impolitesse. Sur un autre banc du square, deux personnes sont assises. Attentives et un peu tristes, comme les pèlerins fidèles d'un haut lieu injustement oublié, elles aussi, en silence, regardent la cathédrale. Je voudrais croire que ce ne sont pas des voyageurs mais des habitants de Reims qui viennent ici tous les soirs. Comment est-ce possible? Cent mille habitants à Reims et seulement quatre personnes ici! Silence crucifiant d'un dieu désespéré. Et pourtant! Une telle communion pourrait prendre sens. Ah! qu'un jour le poète ne soit plus condamné au rayonnement

stérile de sa joie qui, trop forte parce qu'incommuniquée, le menace de folie. Mais la cathédrale est là. Indifférente à l'indifférence. Patiente, forte et d'un humour sauvage, tel le regard qu'aurait pu voir Oedipe, s'il s'était retourné après avoir cru triompher du Sphinx. « Masse de calme et visible réserve »; ce vers de Valéry chante et chante encore en ma mémoire. Masse de calme et visible réserve. Tel un génie tout absorbé en lui-même, qui voit, dans le besoin de l'amitié, seulement une tentation et l'indice d'un doute sur lui-même, la cathédrale se fait oublieuse et presque hautaine. Elle se recueille en elle-même, et se retire dans sa propre nuit, noire et vivante comme le sommeil, immobile irritante et riche comme le silence de Monsieur Teste. Je voudrais tellement qu'elle m'accueille au secret de sa nuit inexorable mais à la fin aimée, non point hostile, mais nécessaire et triste comme le départ d'un ami.

Derrière moi des cris d'enfants. Je me retourne. Ils jouent. L'un d'eux, le « maire », compte. Les autres courent à la recherche d'une lointaine cachette. Cependant, deux d'entre eux, tout près du but, s'avancent en tapinois, et, riant sous cape, écartent prudemment les basses branches d'un if, se faufilent vers l'intérieur puis relâchent les branches. L'arbre a repris son aspect habituel. Jamais, enfant, je n'ai connu de cachette aussi parfaite. Celle-ci, hélas! doit être éventée depuis longtemps. Sans doute s'y cache-t-on encore, seulement pour accomplir un rite, pour honorer l'enfant qui triompha le jour où, le premier, il eût l'idée de se cacher dans l'un des ifs du square. Le « maire » a fini de compter. Il s'éloigne quelque peu du but, son regard passe sur l'if sans s'y arrêter et scrute les recoins du Palais de Justice où, en effet, des enfants sont cachés. L'if est à peine à cinq mètres du but, provocant et naïf comme une autruche, mais le « maire » ne voit pas ce qu'il voit, ridicule et un peu inquiétant comme une vieille dame qui cherche partout les lunettes qu'elle porte déjà sur le nez. Les deux enfants cachés s'étouffent de rire. Cependant, les autres ont quitté les recoins du Palais de Justice et d'un pas détaché de pro-

meneur oisif, s'avancent vers le but. Ils prennent bien leur temps, s'arrêtent comme soudain plongés dans une rêverie. Maintenant les enfants approchent de tous côtés et le « maire » ne sait où courir. Il joue très mal et bientôt tous ont regagné le camp sauf les deux enfants dissimulés dans l'if. Alors, n'en pouvant plus de contenir leur rire, ils devancent l'inévitable et, comme si d'abandonner leur cachette eût jeté quelque doute sur son excellence et même eût signifié une trahison, ils dédaignent de courir au but, et soudain une branche de l'if est secouée de rire. Aussitôt, le « maire », à demi-courbé comme pour se dissimuler lui-même, s'approche de l'if dans un mouvement tournant aussi héroïque que celui d'une grande manœuvre et les deux enfants sont bientôt faits prisonniers. Et la partie de cachette recommence.

Je prends intérêt au jeu mais j'en ai un peu honte comme l'une quinte de toux pendant l'exécution d'une symphonie. Je suis inquiet comme si ces enfants irrespectueux et turbulents, innocents mais brutaux, allaient réveiller la cathédrale assoupie. Je pense à une lettre de T.E. Lawrence où il écrit : « Devant la cathédrale de Wells aujourd'hui il y avait un enfant en tablier blanc qui jouait à la balle; l'enfant était tout à fait inconsciente de la présence de la cathédrale (tout au seul plaisir de l'herbe tendre), mais de la distance où j'étais elle semblait si petite qu'on aurait dit que ce n'était qu'une marguerite agitée au pied de la tour; évidemment je savais qu'elle était d'essence animale: et dans ma haine de tout ce qui est animal j'ai commencé à la mettre en balance avec la cathédrale: et j'ai constaté que j'aurais détruit le bâtiment pour la sauver. » (*) Je me retourne, je regarde la cathédrale. Dans une lenteur épanouie et splendide d'éphémère, elle continue l'approche de sa nuit en parant sa pierre d'un sourire bon comme le crépuscule qui rêve sur le visage d'une femme lors du retour d'une fête. Soudain les cris des enfants ne me gênent plus et ma honte me paraît ridicule comme l'incompréhension et factice comme le dilemme posé

(*) Lettre à Lionel Curtis du 27 Juin 1922.

par Lawrence car je sens que la paix de la cathédrale sûre, noble, réfléchie et violette comme le chant du violoncelle est transposée, vive et virge, dans la gloire de ces cris d'enfants, triomphante comme le haut chant rouge de la trompette.

Maintenant la nuit commence à tomber, les jeux des enfants cessent, les deux personnes assises sur un banc du square se lèvent et s'en vont lentement. Seule la cathédrale est là. Hypnotique, dure et féline mais comme la promesse d'un poing fermé juste avant de s'ouvrir... De même que l'on en veut à une femme qui s'est trop vite fait aimer et que l'on en recherche les défauts pour se préserver de son amour, de même je m'obstine à regarder les statues du portail Sud, et plus encore le défilé des Rois, là-haut, juste au-dessous des tours. Vraiment ils ont peur de passer inaperçus et grimacent comme des masques de carnaval. Rien à faire; ces défauts n'ont pas prise sur la totalité de la cathédrale. Quoi qu'on en dise, l'amour, n'est pas aveugle, mais sa vertu magique c'est de nous rendre indifférents à des défauts qui d'habitude nous sont insupportables, voire même de nous les faire aimer comme des qualités, de surcroît rares et envoûtantes comme une énigme, et ainsi de nous attacher encore davantage. Maintenant je ne me refuse plus à mon amour je regarde de nouveau cette partie de la façade que j'ai photographiée ce soir en arrivant.

Je regarde donc le contrefort et le portail gauches. Je suis trop loin pour distinguer les détails, du reste très ravagés, de leur gable et quand bien même je saurais ce qu'ils représentent, je n'avancerais point dans la connaissance de mon amour. A la base du contrefort, sans décorations, non point terne mais rigoureux comme une géométrie et cependant d'une sûreté charnue et paysanne, la pierre s'assoupit en un jaune mat mais où sourd un gris robuste et uniforme. Plus haut elle se civilise au gable dans l'allègre et clair fouillis de sculptures, respectueuses, attentives et raffinées comme des caractères chinois. Au gable du portail on discerne un calvaire, mais la pierre de la croix est à demi ruinée et la poitrine et la

te du Christ entièrement détruites. Pourtant, par cette absence même, obsédante comme le silence blanc d'une page du *goup de dés*, la vérité du calvaire seulement alors est accomplie; les sculptures sont vaincues mais découvrent enfin le secret de leur puissance en amenant la pierre au repos de sa nuit implacable et sereinement triste comme le rayonnement de la Mort dans la musique de Mozart. Cependant, au niveau de la Rose, encore éclairée par le crépuscule, la pierre s'enchantante d'un jaune calme et sage comme un vieil ivoire qui, plus haut, à la base des tours, luxuriant, tropical et cristallin comme le parfum de l'ananas, s'avive d'un rose beau comme le bonheur, jeune, sûr, féerique et vrai comme la dernière partie de *Du côté de chez Swann*, pour surgir, enfin, au sommet des tours, nietzschéen comme un cri d'aigle, éperdu, enfiévré, acéré et impérieux comme le Devoir d'écrire. Et c'est alors que...

Pas possible. Pas possible.

Au reste, il est temps. Renonçons à la fiction. Je ne suis pas à Reims le 6 Juin, mais à Alger le 19 Décembre.

Maintes fois au cours de mon récit, la nomination s'est d'abord montrée presque impossible: en particulier celle de la lumière de l'Ile de France, de la rose Ouest, et de la cathédrale, le soir, après souper. Alors j'ai été tenté de quitter Reims pour Alger, de passer de la description à la description de cette description. Je n'ai pas cédé à la tentation mais, à regret, car je ne nommais pas l'essentiel: la nomination elle-même. En effet, cette tentation m'a rappelé à la vraie voie du roman, découverte, enfin, dans *Vert comme...*: la genèse se manifeste seulement lorsqu'elle devient genèse de la genèse. C'est pourquoi, si réussi que soit, jusqu'à maintenant, ce chapitre, il est néanmoins incomplet car infidèle aux conclusions du premier chapitre de cette quatrième partie.

Toutefois, j'aurais cédé à la tentation non sans dommages. En effet dès la description de la lumière de l'Ile de France, passer de la nomination au premier degré à celle au second

degré, pour revenir à celle au premier degré et effectuer le même cycle, à propos de chaque description, aurait sans doute rendu le récit même incohérent. En outre, en écrivant *Vert comme...*, j'avais entrevu la possibilité d'une nomination au troisième degré car la nomination de la nomination peut (et doit?) aussi être nommée. Je m'étais alors arbitrairement limité à celle au second degré mais je m'étais promis de m'engager totalement dans cette voie lorsque l'occasion se représenterait. Toutefois, si je m'y étais engagé, dès la description de la lumière de l'Île de France, où, maintenant, en serais-je? Peut-être au même point car j'aurais marché à reculons jusqu'à l'infini, au détriment de la description proprement dite. C'est pourquoi j'ai différé cette tentation jusqu'au moment où le récit de mon voyage à Reims serait presque terminé. En outre, pour revenir à la vraie voie du roman, il m'a semblé logique d'attendre la description la plus difficile mais la plus adéquate à la genèse de la genèse: celle du devoir ou du désir d'écrire. Je suis arrivé maintenant à cette description. Dans *Vert comme...* la nomination au second degré fut faite seulement après coup, mais, en ce cas, le travail est semblable à celui d'une nomination au premier degré, et ne présente donc pas de difficulté particulière. Jusqu'à présent le roman a montré la nécessité de cette division: il serait impossible de décrire un motif et de décrire en même temps sa description. Pourtant, maintenant, je vais tenter de décrire sur le vif, au cœur d'un même travail, ce que j'ai ressenti le 6 Juin à Reims, et la description de cette description, que je vais faire à Alger le 19 Décembre.

C'est alors que... Oui, c'est alors que le devoir d'écrire que j'avais cru laisser prisonnier de Paris, se fit tout à coup impérieusement présent. Non. Je préférerais encore terminer mon roman par « C'est alors que... » plutôt que de me satisfaire de cette phrase. Avant le motif même, déjà une difficulté. Préciser le sentiment que donnerait la lecture de mon roman si je le terminais par des points de suspension.

Fin d'une sonate avant l'accord parfait. Tel un récit de Kafka. Une comparaison ni une image ne suffisent. Il faut encore les justifier c'est à dire les nommer. Des adjectifs. Lesquels? Inachevé? Faible. Inachevé? Inachevé? Exaspérant. Cet adjectif ne convient pas, je le sais. Pourquoi me harcèle-t-il comme si j'oubliais combien l'esprit est d'abord et longtemps bête. Mouvement qui reflue sur lui-même... Sur lui-même. Reflux de la mer. Notre voyage à Etretat. Ou plutôt non: tout entier encore au crescendo de la phrase, le lecteur en espère le couronnement. Il n'en croit pas ses yeux. Il relit et relit encore: c'est alors que... C'est alors que... Il en fait un appel, un Sésame incandescent capable de faire apparaître, tout à coup, la suite de la phrase, invisible, mais à coup sûr écrite. — à l'encre sympathique. — Quel mot! Que signifie?... Non. Dans le désordre de la création, frayons-nous une voie étroite. Si possible! Le lecteur relit encore: c'est alors que... C'est alors que... Avec moins de force, comme une prière. Pour endormir sa stupeur. Lasse de n'être point exaucée. Vraiment les points de suspension terminent le livre.

Unir en une phrase toutes ces comparaisons. Sentiment prouvé lors de la mort inattendue d'un être cher. On ne peut pas, on ne veut pas l'admettre. On répète seulement: « Ce n'est pas possible. Ce n'est pas possible ». Relisons ce que je viens d'écrire.

Le reflux de la mer, certes, mais quel reflux? Marée d'équinoxe tout à coup arrêtée. Elle hésite. On voudrait croire qu'elle hésite, mais non c'est le reflux irrémédiable. Malaise. Duperie. Injustice. Bêtise. Bête comme la conquête assurée d'une femme manquée par bêtise au dernier moment. Ecrivons donc:

Je préférerais encore terminer mon roman par: c'est alors que... plutôt que de me satisfaire de cette phrase. Points de suspension injustes et dissonants comme, avant la haute mer, le reflux stupide et irrémédiable d'une marée d'équinoxe, incompréhensible, on ne sait, et par cela même, mol vertige d'une sauvage nuit indécise comme le sens de l'homme chez Kafka.

Est-ce clair? Je veux dire grammaticalement correct. Quel nom qualifie incompréhensible? Reflux à cause de l'orthographe, mais phrase ambiguë pour celui qui ne la lirait pas mais l'entendrait. « Mol vertige... » désagréable rupture de construction. Corrigeons.

..... *Points de suspension injustes et dissonants comme, avant la haute mer, le reflux irrémédiable et stupide d'une marée d'équinoxe. On s'interroge, on croit comprendre, on se refuse à comprendre, on s'attendait à une réponse, si dure soit-elle, mais son profil même s'efface, on ne sait plus quelle était la question, ni même s'il y avait une question, un lent vertige fait tourner la tête d'une sauvagerie obtuse et molle comme le sens de l'homme chez Kafka.*

Je relis ma phrase. Je ferme à demi les yeux. Lentement, lentement, je la fais sonner en moi, avec l'attention d'un violoniste qui accorde son instrument. A peu près satisfait. A peu près. Cette phrase n'est pas la seule possible. Peut-être inadéquate. Inadéquate. Elle ne sonne pas faux mais ce n'est pas le ton. Toute puissance du langage. Il marche de sa marche. Puissance autonome mais vide. Quand elle ne dit qu'elle-même, elle ne dit plus rien. Hugo. « Le langage le plus dangereux des biens. » (*) A propos de points suspension parler de Kafka! Non et non. Mortifié de cette méprise. Mais ce qui est écrit est écrit. De plus, comme châtiement, il me faut néanmoins corriger ma phrase et même dire d'abord sa non-vérité. « Classique est l'écrivain qui porte un critique en soi-même et l'associe intimement à ses travaux. » (**) Hypocrite et vaniteuse consolation. A gifler. Et tout cela nourrit encore, jusqu'à la nausée et à la colère, cette excroissance impudique et niaise. Il jura mais un peu tard... Le sens de mon roman n'est pas le désespoir mais l'amour. Quel amour? Si le roman se terminait par: c'est alors que... son sens resterait inachevé mais non pas fondamentalement comme chez Kafka. Le lecteur se sentirait plutôt injustement frustré d'une joie possible. Re commençons.

(*) HÖLDERLIN, *Esquisses*.

(**) VALÉRY, *Variété II*: Situation de Baudelaire.

... Points de suspension dissonants, comme, avant la haute mer, le reflux irrémédiable d'une marée d'équinoxe, stupides et injustes comme si, à la suite d'un accident matériel survenu au piano, l'exécution d'une sonate de Mozart, entendue pour la première fois devait définitivement rester achevée.

Cette phrase semble convenir. Et pourtant? Si le roman se terminait par: c'est alors que... le lecteur ne saurait pas sans le hasard, le prive de la suite. Corrigéons encore une fois. Pour la dernière fois. Terminons au plus tôt cette mésaventure stupide. A quoi bon s'imaginer ce que le lecteur aura pas à s'imaginer? En écrivant le début de ce chapitre, j'en étais arrivé à regretter tant de réussite et tant de bonheur. Je souhaitais que le lecteur entrevît à quel prix ils ont obtenus et maintenus. Mon espérance est comblée et au-delà. Instant d'hébétude: seul repos possible. Rien de plus fatigant que d'écrire la genèse de la genèse: je ne peux jamais me quitter car, en principe, tout ce qui est pensé doit être écrit. C'est pourquoi il importe de ne pas tout dire, trop tôt et d'attendre le sujet choisi. Allons encore un effort. Faisons en.

Je préférerais terminer mon roman par: c'est alors que... plutôt que de me satisfaire de cette phrase. Points de suspension dissonants et incroyables comme, avant la haute mer, le reflux pourtant irrémédiable d'une marée d'équinoxe, stupides, injustes et déroutants comme l'inachèvement d'une sonate d'un compositeur inconnu. Est-il encore vivant? Sa mort seule nous prive-t-elle de la fin de la sonate? A-t-il été incapable de l'écrire? N'est-ce qu'un parti-pris sarcastique et tout comme un défi sans raison? On ne le saura jamais.

C'est alors que...

Pas possible. Pas possible.

Pas encore possible.

Impossible même de « faire attention ». Dans la maison quelqu'un cloue une planche. Ma main, là, devant moi. Elle

tient, je tiens la cigarette qui se consume peu à peu. Je les regarde avec un étonnement maniaque et circonspect de nouveau-né. *Dans la rue, cris d'enfants. Le vent. Un rideau plastronne comme une femme enceinte obscène.* Je suis assis dans mon fauteuil. A Paris, Augustin Meaulnes est assis sur son banc. Il attend que s'ouvre la fenêtre fermée à jamais. *Encore ces coups de marteau.* Mon stylo, ma feuille de papier, mon sousmain. Fouilles: à quoi pouvaient bien servir ces outils anté-diluviens? L'archéologue les examine encore, les soupèse, les retourne, les laisse choir. Sur la place du village, dans une tribu d'Afrique, une *Cadillac*. Alger le 26 Décembre. La qualité même du début de ce chapitre me désespère: N'est-ce pas un autre que moi qui l'a écrit? Je pense à Reims, à la cathédrale. Mon ami est mort en déportation. J'ai oublié mon amitié. Un numéro dans une statistique. *Coups de marteau. Pépiements d'oiseau.* J'en souffre, comme d'une sorte d'aimantation lourde à même le cerveau. Proust et sa chambre de liège. Je suis vécu. Me faire attentif à moi-même pour être enfin. Je pense à Reims, à la cathédrale, à cet instant où je vis les tours comme en mouvement. Il est, certes, stupide de parler d'inspiration, seulement épiphénomène d'une harmonie physiologique. Et pourtant? Un prêtre, à genoux, devant un autel. Il s'ennuie. Il n'a même pas envie de prier. Insoucieux de la grâce. *Toujours ces coups de marteau.* Ne nous égarons pas. Il faut à tout prix me faire sourd à ce monde-ci.

L'homme. Dans la main, un silex. Bêtes sauvages. Plus de silex mais la main magnifiée. L'Homme se lève. Le combat du même contre le même devient possible. L'archéologue a compris la fonction des outils. Je ne pense plus à Reims, je suis à Reims. Je vois les tours s'élever dans leur essor. Ma dernière mésaventure m'a rendu prudent. Néanmoins, si je pouvais dire ce que signifie: « Je suis à Reims », on commencerait, peut-être, à comprendre l'essence de la mémoire. A Loches, dans un cachot du Martelet, tout à coup, un rayon de soleil. Le prisonnier est toujours dans son cachot. Du moins voit-il le soleil. Je suis à Reims, je vois les tours s'élever

ans leur essor. A Loches, Ludovic le More couvre de peintures les murs de sa prison.

Ma mésaventure avait quelque peu atteint ma confiance en moi-même. L'essence de l'inspiration c'est de ne pas se commander. Pour l'orgueil d'être homme quel châtement pire que l'impuissance. Souvent je crains que ce roman ne m'échappe, ne se cristallise soudain, glorieux et mort comme l'histoire. Plutôt mourir à 37 ans que de... Voilà. Derrière moi. Il me faut dire, non je modifie, mais, j'ai modifié l'exposition des images, non je découvre mais j'ai découvert la technique qui donne à l'image plus d'éclat tout en respectant davantage son mystère. Tout à ma joie acerbe comme la revanche, je viens de lire à Hélène ce que j'ai écrit. Elle me demande comment j'en suis venu à cette nouvelle technique. Insoucieux, je réponds par un mot vague. Je m'aperçois maintenant de mon infidélité à élucider aussitôt la genèse de la découverte. Je n'ai cure de mauvaises excuses. Pourtant je m'interroge. Beaufret dit du *Cogito*, que, bien loin d'être la nécessaire clef de voûte de toute philosophie pré-post-cartésienne, il témoigne plutôt expressément de l'oubli de l'Être, commencé dès Platon.

A Etretat, je m'inquiétais du brouillard. Une dame m'a dit: « Il faut attendre dix ou onze heures ». Edwin Fischer joue le concerto en mi bémol de Beethoven. Dernières mesures de l'andante, délicates, diaphanes, retenues, précaires, irréelles. Le thème, distrait, s'effiloche. Regard qui ne regarde pas. Pourtant, frénésie lente et dissymétrique comme un pressentiment d'une image et, soudain éclate le final, printemps avide de vie comme le soleil lorsque la mer se réveille. Maintenant, je renaissais à moi-même. Mais vague, gratuit, et à la fin nul comme un pur possible. Il jura mais un peu tôt...

Je vois les tours s'élever dans leur essor. Comment faire voir ce que j'ai vu? Comment dire l'impossible? Comment une masse de pierre peut-elle, soudain, se mettre comme en mouvement? En outre, à cet instant précis, le devoir d'écrire s'empara de moi. Si j'arrive à nommer ce « comme », mes vieux sentiments ne seront plus juxtaposés mais leur liaison

prendra sens. Un chasseur suit le vol d'une compagnie de perdreaux. Sur la détente, le doigt dense comme tout un corps. Imminence ivre. Brume. Et il pense: « Que mon fusil devienne un aimant! Que mon fusil devienne un aimant! » Paratonnerre en rut de foudre. Je me veux, tout entier, sou venir. Que n'en suis-je maître! Que ne suis-je à Reims, juste avant l'évènement! Désespoir d'un physicien qui ne pourrait jamais refaire une expérience cruciale. Mais, inutile. Je n'en saurais pas plus, ou, du moins, je ne pourrais pas plus en dire.

Un instant, mon cœur défaut. La crise est passée mais la fatigue me rejette à ce monde-ci. Je lève les yeux de mon bureau. Je regarde Hélène. Sourire mais précaire comme un éphémère sans courage. Attentive, elle scrute mon visage, redoute d'y lire le signe du destin. Elle implore déjà la grâce d'un sursis. Je souris à Hélène. Je pense à une phrase de sa lettre: « Sourire, mais comme si abandonné des dieux, il venait près d'une femme chercher la lumière. Ah! m'anéantir pour te donner la vie ». Nouveau sourire d'Hélène mais bref. Je m'étonne et m'inquiète. J'ai l'impression que ce n'est pas moi qu'elle regarde ou plutôt un moi encore inconnu de moi-même. A tout prix, il faut aboutir aujourd'hui.

Je vois les tours s'élever dans leur essor. En Hollande, une tulipe éclôt dont le parfum subtil rend niais et grossier celui de toutes les autres fleurs. Le boomerang revient à l'instant même où il part. Παλίντροπος ἀρμονία. Comment exprimer une idée aussi « illogique »: un avenir qui devient passé sans jamais être présent et qui pourtant est la Présence même. Temps qui passe et ne s'écoule pas. Je me refuse à tout ce langage philosophique. Fatigue lourde comme le désespoir. Je comptais avoir fini de travailler à 20h 30 et je n'ai pas encore découvert l'essentiel. Maintenant la T.S.F. marche. Un moment je l'écoute tout en me promenant de long en large. Je pense au soleil de minuit, à cet instant nul et vrai comme un point mathématique, où le soleil renaît à l'instant même où il meurt. Je reprends espoir et me rassieds à mon bureau. La comparaison avec le soleil de minuit est

ste mais insuffisante. Ah! si Breton n'avait pas déjà dit: « explosante-fixe ». Langage insidieusement pauvre, visqueux, menaçant et insaisissable. Je pense aux deux images découvertes pour nommer mon sentiment lorsque je vis la Rose Ouest. Je ressasse les mêmes images: « musique inouïe... fulguration stable... fulguration stable... » Bovidé! Ah! que n'ai-je fini de décrire ce voyage à Reims. Je décide soudain de supprimer l'une des deux images. Dégarnir le secondaire. A contre-meur. « Cuisine » de la littérature. Je pense à la « Genèse d'un poème », texte d'E. A. Poe, auquel je me réfèrais sans cesse au début de ce roman et dont pourtant je n'ai jamais parlé: « ...Contempler les laborieux et indécis embryons de pensée, la vraie décision prise au dernier moment, l'idée si souvent entrevue comme en un éclair et refusant si longtemps de se laisser voir en pleine lumière... le choix prudent, les bouleversements et les interpolations, en un mot les rouages et les chaînes, les trucs pour le changement de décor... » Tant pis ma décision est prise.

Alger, 3 Juillet. Mais non. Feinte résignation. Il me faut nommer le mouvement des tours, leur hauteur soudaine et provocante, puisqu'à cet instant je ressentis le devoir d'écrire. Comment la cathédrale me fut-elle révélée dans toute sa plénitude et en même temps comme un mystère encore une fois à découvrir? Comment dire? Je cherche et cherche encore une image. En vain. Ou plutôt, je sens en moi une parole, puissante mais au loin et captive et pourtant sur le point de se désentraver. Toujours rien. Poignante et vaine souffrance. Poignant. POIGNANT. Vite, vérifions dans le titré. Bienvenue ambiguïté! Douleur poignante, point du jour; le déjà là, le ne pas encore, mais sur le point de. Il ne faut exprimer le double visage, mais la vérité une du mot poignant. Insatisfait mais déjà... « Vivre à perdre haleine », dit Breton. A perdre haleine. Dommage que Breton... A perdre haleine. A per... Je pense au titre du roman. Enfin.

ET C'EST ALORS QUE j'ai vu l'invisible. Immobiles les tours dérament, se reculent sur la nef, se replient sur elles-mêmes, se distendent, s'abîment en une agonie dense

comme la Mort et résurrection du soleil de minuit où l'ivresse lustrale d'une ténue et suffocante blancheur, la musique inouïe du point d'orgue du jour, le Chaos appert au tonnant recueil de la pierre, érige les tours à leur lieu stable, magnifie l'essor de la cathédrale, décèle, mais en une muette exultation, sa toute Présence: à perte de vue, poignant désir solaire d'une encore inhumaine Toison d'or. Devenu fou, on ne sait, éperdu de joie, ébloui, le poète crie: « LE SILENCE PARLE. LE SILENCE PARLE. LE SILENCE PARLE.

Le silence parle. Le silence parle et ainsi, à Reims, tout à coup, je fus amené au seuil du sacré. Mais la parole inouïe du dieu doit encore devenir langage et c'est pourquoi, elle transite le poète d'une grâce matutinale, aride et despotique jusqu'à ce qu'il consente enfin à la transmuier en joie, en accomplissant le seul DEVOIR: celui d'écrire, de nommer l'innommé, l'être, l'immobile fulguration éternelle du Temps.

Mais, volontairement imprévoyant, je n'ai pas sur moi le moindre carnet où écrire. La nuit est presque tombée, et il est trop tard pour acheter un carnet dans une papeterie. Au reste, ce soir j'aurais bien peu de temps pour écrire et, demain, nous devons poursuivre notre voyage, puis rentrer à Paris où je devrais préparer l'oral du concours auquel je me suis présenté. De plus, à l'hôtel, une trentaine de dissertations m'attendent. Un ami me les a confiées et leur correction est très urgente. De surcroît, j'ai décidé de décrire la Mortefontaine: pour comparer le roman avec la peinture, mais surtout, parce que je me suis récemment aperçu que ce roman est, sur un point, petitement traditionaliste: il est humaniste; bien loin de la peinture de Cézanne, mais comme celle que je n'aime pas, il grouille d'hommes. Quelle place faite au regard! La nature est presque absente. Il est temps, non pas de promouvoir un art anti-humaniste, mais de retrouver la Terre non-humaine.

Et c'est ainsi que je me suis « endormi » de toutes ces bonnes raisons pour, une fois encore, me refuser à la vie neuve qui m'était offerte. Je dis seulement à Hélène: « Je

n'aurais jamais cru que les tours de Notre-Dame de Reims fussent aussi hautes. « Alors, nous avons quitté le parvis de la cathédrale. Lentement nous avons descendu la rue Libergier. Maintes fois, nous nous sommes retournés pour La voir encore. Avant de prendre la rue Clovis, une dernière fois, je la regardai. Toute royale encore, mais simple, fine et comme calfeutrée par une légère ironie distraite, d'un noir uni, éteint, fruste et précieux comme celui d'une statue égyptienne, la cathédrale me fit don d'une accablante douceur divisée de larmes.

Le lendemain, en passant par Pierrefonds et Compiègne, nous sommes rentrés à Paris.

PAUL FÉVRIER

L'ARABESQUE

L'arabesque, dans le duvet de sa peau, c'est le chemin privé le plus émouvant que je connaisse vers ce rendez-vous dans l'automne.

Il faut le cœur agile pour sauter la barrière, la main leste pour dégraffer la ronce.

Alors, douceur, tu peux glisser dans les foulées de la chair en tournant comme un chien fou.

Jusqu'à ce que l'ombre de tes doigts, tendrement, obscurcisse son épaule.

VILLE

J'ai circulé dans cette ville chaude et froide où les fenêtres ouvraient sur le four glacé des tuiles et des fumées.

J'ai bien aimé ce railway d'après-midi chargé de havre sacs, de cuirs et d'une prenante odeur de fougère fanée.

Un garçon débraillé aux lèvres mûres gardait en ses yeux verts de vastes feuillaisons de filles;

Nous dévalions à travers d'arborescentes orties;

Les hommes levaient la tête, croyant entendre le bruit de la mer,

Tandis que la mort, bien avant la nuit, hérissait ses grinçantes barrières.

LE CHEMIN DU FUTUR

Je vais dormir, maintenant, dans les nippes de la consolation, sous l'averse de ciel nu de cette dernière nuit d'été.

Je vais souffrir, criblé de plomb brûlant, les dents serrées sur ce cri de bête, la tête de biais sur l'os de cet amour décharné, les yeux fermés comme des griffes.

*Je parcourrai mes longs chemins de sable à pas de chien,
Bien en main, la lourde pierre du sang,
Les lèvres scellées sur ce mot déchirant:
Demain.*

CITADINE

Agile, elle marche la nuit sur la corniche d'argile de la ville.

En bas, c'est la glycine électrique aux mille grappes de verre tintinabulant au vent et le pont d'os arqué sur le fleuve nonchalant.

Ce relief charbonneux, cette sudation lente d'usine assoupie, ce béant trou d'aérolithe, c'est notre lit d'amant sacagé par le temps.

Il y a bien l'homme dément qui hurle sur le ballast du chemin pour demain.

Il y a bien le quotidien lacéré dans la griffure des haies et le phosphore des immondices.

Mais rien ne me peut déprendre de toi, citadine, écheveau de sang chaud emmêlé à mes doigts.

CONSEIL

Ne maudissez pas les orties:

Elles ont le courage de leur médiocrité.

Hommes qui passez, remerciez-les

De vous enseigner la méfiance:

Il faut apprendre à éviter.

JACQUES DUPIN

L'ARBRE

« L'effort de mes racines, si puissantes, si profondes et si enchevêtrées, éprises de tant d'or à travers tant de nuit, n'aurait hissé au jour que ce fragile fût, ce feuillage indigent ignoré des rayons et des ombres, et que la prochaine bourrasque emportera, avec les trois notes d'un oiseau désespéré...? »

A son insu, l'espace non frayed, l'espace-aux-liens, s'accroissait d'une branche maîtresse.

VISITATION

Serpent, sur la glu de ta langue, la graine du pavot voyage en sûreté.

L'oiseau-ferronnier se tasse dans la fourche d'un chêne, sa grille anéantie: et la lisibilité du ciel s'interrompt. Et la vermine monte et murmure dans les plis chevauchants de la pourpre et du lin. La pestiférée, les dieux la possèdent debout.

Femme, cette nuit le fondement des ailes est devenu visible. La lumière de la Tragédie empèse encore la brume des sommets.

Avant de s'endormir dans la tranchée des fouilles, elle plonge sa lampe dans les flancs de l'urne de grès où dort une ancienne eau. Qui lèchera le bombement de leur grossesse? Qui franchira le bruit rouillé du torrent?

L'EGYPTIENNE

*Où tu sombres, la profondeur n'est plus.
Il a suffi que j'emporte ton souffle dans un roseau
Pour qu'une graine au désert éclatât sous mon talon.*

*Tout est venu d'un coup dont il ne reste rien.
Rien que la marque sur ma porte
Des mains brûlées de l'embaumeur.*

L'ÉPERVIER

*Ton regard est trop grand pour une seule cible errante.
L'effraction, la prouesse ont lassé les couleurs.
Entre ton maître et toi, dans le même cachot,
Le vers de la folie ouvrira-t-il
Ce soupirail funèbre minuscule?
Unira-t-il le nuage et les fers
Sous l'écriture tremblée de la rose d'Octobre?*

*Car sinon le cuir cramoisi du leurre,
Que reste-t-il au jour et à la nuit
Pour éclairer leur ressemblance,
Ou la mettre en lambeaux?*

LIMBES

*Le soleil entre à reculons dans un corps de méduse. Sa
clarté avilie tremble au carreau des bouges. Elle n'affectionne
plus que le rictus et l'accroupissement de quelques travail-
leurs arriérés, plantés sur la perfection de leur cri. L'élégan-
ce est au vol entravé des oiseaux de nuit. Ainsi le songe gris
du hibou se couche par leurs soins en cryptogrammes dans
les feuilles de plomb. Le songe, ou l'attente infinie d'un
orage éclatant au cœur de l'ammonite. Et voici l'arbre en-*

chaîné à l'improbable rire des fossiles. L'usure des poussières efface sur l'écorce la griffe d'un oiseau de proie, d'un oiseau ancien. Pourtant les fruits dont les lèvres se privent, ne sont pas moins obscurs, ni mieux gardés qu'au premier jour.

LES BRISANTS

L'océan rendait ses noyés, les débris de ses barques, tel un mercenaire retour des combats exhibant ses balafres et son or. La peste des hauts-fonds, propagée par les sables, se glissait entre le masque et le visage de la ville. Les trafiquants d'écume s'affairaient... Pourquoi avoir forcé la barre si contre soi la vague dure et bleue doit mourir? J'interrogeais pour deux le délabrement fantastique du ciel au bout du promontoire. Les algues sur ton corps et le scintillement du sel sur ta lèvre te disaient complice du tumulte et sœur du silence qui s'édifiait au fond de lui. O mon amour, le vent n'était pas plus rapide au milieu de la mer qu'à la surface de ton ongle. Le cri du sextant, ce fut le corps même du drame écartelé et brûlé vif entre ses branches, comme entre les plombs d'un vitrail auquel tes yeux n'ont refusé ni leur ombre, ni leur éclair. Et l'aube a refermé ta main sur un insecte mort.

PAUL VALET

FUIR

Fuir Fuir Fuir

Espace de givre élagué de roseaux

Banquise de chair dépouillée d'oiseaux

Chair blanche et rance que la souffrance épargne

Fuir Fuir Fuir

Jointures qui enflent et qui saignent et qui craquent

Fuir Fuir Fuir

Galop de la mer quelque part nulle part

Au large d'un passé où l'avenir se joue

Fuir Fuir Fuir

Tout tremble sue et crève

Et tout recommence

Fuir Fuir Fuir

Pensées vagabondes aux ailes de corbeaux

Fuir Fuir Fuir

Pensées usagées découpées en morceaux

Fuir Fuir Fuir

L'homme attaché à son arbre desséché

Fuir Fuir Fuir

L'heure qui vous serre à la gorge de mendiant

Fuir Fuir Fuir

Espace d'une minute où le temps se déchire

Dans ce grand espace où rien ne se passe

Et déjà c'est l'heure

Fuir Fuir Fuir

De partout de partout

L'homme est cerné par son ombre étroite

Inutile de crier au secours

ÉTRANGER

L'homme qui vit Étranger à la vie

L'homme qui meurt Étranger à la mort

Présent dans le regard de tous les hommes fermés

Béant dans le regard de tous les hommes blessés

Est infiniment fragile

LA ZONE

Dans ces terrains vagues

Dans ces terrains graves

Où les fleurs sont sales

Où les cœurs sont haves

POÈMES

*Où l'amour se règle
Au compte des étoiles*

*Toute la vieille ferraille
Se rit du soleil*

LA MÉMOIRE

*Ce n'est pas si simple
De rompre le passé*

*Comme on rompt le pain
Entre ses mains oublieuses*

L'ESPACE

*Quand le silence devient incolore et sonore
Alors seulement je commence à y voir clair*

LE TEMPS

*La scie avance
Dent pour dent*

*La scie dévore
Cent pour cent*

La scie éclate

Gueule de bois

ENFANCE

*Les jours étaient profonds
Capitonnés de nuit*

PAULÈNE ASPEL

TRIPTYQUE AMÉRICAIN (*)

I. 1. AUBES

*En l'air si clair que seul y danse un pur esprit
Esprit
Un air si beau un air si fier un si grand cri
D'azur
Que parfums verts d'ozone et de pleines fougères
O hommes
Chantent en chœurs les cœurs de chairs les âmes chères
O âmes
Un air si beau...*

mais au dessous,

immonde bruit,

*Des diatribes hennissantes, critiques sans corps, remuantes
sauterelles sales, sorties de gîtes larvaires, de hocquetant cla-
potis de fleuves où furent jetés à pleins seaux tant de perni-
cieux problèmes, la fausseté comme fumée grasse, tout le
hideux du monde obscurcit notre air,*

— oh! écoutez donc...

*n'entendez-vous pas ces corolles qui s'ouvrent, des na-
celles venues d'un avenir proche déversent sur nous ces arcs-*

(*) Les poèmes AUBES et MARCHÉ DES PIONNIERS constituent la première partie du *Triptyque Américain*.

en-ciel en espaliers d'harmonie allégeuse de poids, l'écho répond à cette oblongue racine puissante aspirée vers le haut, tandis que battent des anches, des ailes, des cils, des anches, des ailes, des narines, des harpes largement lient les regards, au dessus des nénuphars, sur le lac de ta tendresse — ô mien, ô mienne — des ombelles et des belles, (au fond ronfle l'orgue des orages d'amour futurs), toutes banderolles alertes, c'est la fête au village, écoutons, faveurs épanouies, la fête en tête, les têtes en faites, la fête en courte pointe, bien-aimées, leurs yeux s'allongent, leur ligne plus subtile qu'une barque de gala, leurs chevelures deltaïques divisées en les sept arts, toits d'ébène sans chapeaux de remords, ou mâtures dorées, leurs proues se gonflent, quelques-unes ont des faces de lanterne — pas d'yeux, une flamme — et vogue l'amour, il faut tenter de vivre, sous le soleil levant, comment vivre sans aimer...

écoutons...

des délicatesses, il s'en cachait partout, pas besoin d'en vendre ou d'en acheter, pas de marchand, vulgaire débiteur de délicatesses à la douzaine en plaqué-or ou social-brillant, tous savaient où les trouver, certains en étaient même revêtus du front, des yeux jusqu'aux chevilles, sans qu'on pût toutefois les toucher, y menaient de frêles passerelles, et la fête au village marchait son train, c'était la fête vraie, la fête sur les rivages, et les musiques nappent doux et gai ceux qui les écoutent

le thème en est la paix, et la vie prospère sans doute, les variations la guerre mais, s'y enroulent comme des cachemires de réconfort, venues d'un hier éprouvé, multicolores et éternelles, les litanies des vieux carols, les cantilènes sonnaillantes et les mesnies qui bondissent, adoucissant les clochers sans style, les pauvres d'argent, les arbres de Noël orphelins, les cœurs droits des honnêtes chrétiens, les champs neigeux et les vieilles da-

*mes qui font la danse des petits pains, s'y enroulent les douces
chansons, dévallantes et sonnantes d'un bout à l'autre de l'ar-
née sainte*

*finalement le ciel est à tous ceux qui aiment — n'e-
pas choir*

*or une âme se plaint et pleure en vain
elle a perdu un soulier de satin
et boîte sans refrain*

*mais écoutons... les banderelles bleu vert indig-
jaune orangé rouge relieuses de rires d'enfants, et les ciels d-
musique qui tombaient comme des pluies d'été, s'implan-
taient dans leur culture millénaire et rejaillissaient en pro-
messes nouvelles, un univers d'une juste mesure diamanté-
alimentait d'abord leur attente, et enfin les plus effervescen-
tes gloires, tissées des plus lumineuses paillettes de la sen-
suelle aventure, de mille feux, de mille fléchettes, de mill-
dons, de mille vouloirs semblables, tenaient à demi-mort
ceux-là qui allaient vivre jusqu'au point extrême de leu-
être... ô dagues, ô pierres, ô pluies, ô vertiges, ô grâces, o-
roue sûre du destin, ils aimaient sans savoir, ils faisaient san-
douter, ils étaient choix sans douleur, lumière sans conscien-
ce de la nuit; les pas dans l'herbe mouillée, sous le soleil
parfait, l'herbe le parfum l'essence et l'air l'air qui fait vivre
— allongés dans le pré, déliez leurs sandales leurs ceinture
leurs couronnes comment vivre sans aimer*

*l'air étonne, va et revient, tonne
et décroît, c'est toi ou moi, on ne
sait rien, mais on y croit et on est bien*

*rois, disent-ils, nous sommes rois, l'air est à nous
appelez, appelez, mourir encore et plusieurs fois, l'intelli-
gence est morte, les buts toujours atteints sont des miroir
luisants de désirs, sans plan et sans rature, sans pleurs e-
sans ... c'est si simple, personne n'hésite...*

*dans l'air qui vibre, des amours voltigent,
l'un semble cassé sur sa tige...*

le menton dans la paume, c'était bon d'écouter, même si lourde devient maintenant l'humidité, mais les loures y jouent encore de surs rubans d'amour, les yeux volages se sont envolés dans les branches foisonnantes, et les narines se sont mises au balcon de ces fragiles festivals de parfums, qu'en restera-t-il? un ballet de parfums, non, ils ne mourront point, — pour savourer les joies il faut des connaisseurs, à la seule fin d'affiner sans les pâlir les essences des faits de la vie bien agie, se marièrent donc l'or à l'amour, la flamme à l'air, et l'herbe à l'eau.

Et toujours là l'espace. On n'écoute plus.

C'est alors qu'il fallut l'accepter et le saisir, l'évaluer, le calculer, le diviser, l'égaliser, le valoriser, l'expliquer, l'utiliser, le recompter, le revaloriser — ou tenter de le faire.

I. 2. MARCHE DES PIONNIERS

Par des sentiers non sus, conviés, par et vers de grands appels touffus, pionniers, nous le sommes, bigarrés simplement, pionniers, la pioche au front, nos cœurs sont sans façons, nos visées de géants, fleuries sur des passés nauséabonds, nos pas, vouîtes bien arquées portant des charpentes honnêtes, sont conquérants — c'est bien ainsi que nous l'entendons.

Las des espaces petits, las des plaies jamais closes, des fatigues à la racine de chiendent, des famines abstraites, des fracas de cités squelettiques, laissées là les familles, creusets de préjugés, les amis, lambeaux ravaudés de pièces fausses, c'est bien vers l'Ouest que nous marchons, que le soleil rouge nous aveugle, nous grise et nous somme, qui sculpte, et offre

et pousse vers nous ces neufs chefs-d'œuvre de terre à la ligne imprécisée, ces informes frontons de nature aux contours dans l'attente, et toujours cette odeur de terre qui tous les jours nous invite — c'est bien ainsi que nous l'entendons.

Nous réussissons, à coups de religions, de pieds, d'épaules et d'occasions, de plans d'actions; voici des voies à nous, voilà des cités, puisqu'il en faut, comme pointes et comme bouquets de nos efforts alliés, sans concession à la beauté, quelle beauté?, et comme carrefours d'intérêts carrés; nous ignorons la loi, quelle loi?, la loi, le cas, c'est moi, selon l'exigence immédiate, ah! que notre ignorance est immense des héritages compliqués, car nos mâchoires sont solides et comme nos chevaux, sans fortrature, nos cœurs sont emplis de fortitude — c'est bien ainsi que nous l'entendons.

Un rêve poind? la plaine ici et toujours présente, qui déploie sans cesse son mystère, eaux et terres, et les crinières babillardes des forêts profondes sont notre mélodie et nos conversations; un obstacle enivrant: les rocs et les monts; d'autres rêves, vers des mieux gagnés, d'où naissent bientôt nos très personnelles contradictions; nous nous créons de chères servitudes, salutaires, et d'infinies solutions; nous accueillera un siège en bois, dans la maison en bois, où nous aurons beaucoup de droits; Dieu qui nous voit nous comprendra — c'est bien ainsi que nous l'entendons.

Climat n'est guère aimable, séduisant sur ses rivages, il est en son centre brutal et despote, et souvent sans sagesse, sans mesure, de ses dons comme de ses tortures; il recroqueville, mord, bafoue, tord, érode les forts, que voulez-vous, il faut s'y faire; il inflige des pieds-bots et des crampons de serpents, marches de plomb dans la boue verte ou noire, marches d'argile dans les vents fous, pour nous tremper comme des aciers, — que voulez-vous, il faut s'y faire — à l'assez que l'on répète et à l'encore qui dure et qui durcit, grandiose défi de base, que nous relèverons — c'est bien ainsi que nous l'entendons.

Et qu'avons-nous trouvé que nous n'ayons capté, de multiples façons?, cette grande patience obscure, ce grand silence innocent et curieux d'êtres; des sols dociles à nos désirs démesurés; des parfums lourds mais exhortants; des rythmes simples, aisés pour nos poumons et nos cerveaux; et tout un tas de confus bruits, nous les avons articulés, allurés, multipliés, telles se déplient les ailes d'un ballet, et le mouvement fait les eaux vives; demain nous répondra, à nos tenaces tentatives; notre thème est la foi; et toujours cette odeur de terre qui toujours nous invite — c'est bien ainsi que nous l'entendons.

Ainsi à ces régions nous fournirons des fossiles d'hommes, squelettes lisses et crânes de toutes proportions; des enfants forts à sève toujours recommencée: sous leur peau qu'un violent vent de vie aère, leurs os sont bien forgés, par bon tailleur de pierre; la hantise et la quête des trouvailles nous leur lèguerons; le secret du commun secret; l'ordre dans les possessions; la main naïve et la porte ouverte sans illusions, des hurrahs-mes-frères avec coups de poings aimables dans l'épaule du voisin; nous leur laisserons enfin, cahotante et roulante, et puis volant d'un océan à l'autre, et jadis teinte de rouge brique, ou bien de mélanine, et puis toujours d'espérance verte, nous leur laisserons, éblouissante et bruissante, une geste, la geste des pionniers de l'Amérique — c'est bien ainsi que nous l'entendons.

ANDRÉ VANNIER

LES PRISONNIERS

Finale­ment, Richard décrocha le télé­phone.

« Allo! Syl­vain? »

« Oui! »

« Ici Richard ».

« Ah! bonsoir. Com­ment vas-tu? »

« Mal. Juliette n'est pas ren­trée ».

Un silence.

« Ecoute », re­prit Syl­vain, « ne bouge pas, je m'habille et je vais te re­joindre ».

Sou­lagé, Richard re­tour­na s'asseoir au sa­lon et ou­blian­t un peu Juliette, songea à Syl­vain. Dans vingt mi­nutes il se­rait là et par la seule ver­tu de sa pré­sen­ce tout re­pren­drait meilleur as­pect. Dans le pro­fond fau­teuil de cuir Richard se ren­versa pour exa­miner le pla­fond. Balançant au bout de son pied gauche sa pantoufle de cuir verni il se prit à sou­rire. Ce vieux Syl­vain! Il lui sem­blait n'avoir ja­mais vécu sans lui. Leur ami­tié re­mon­ta­it à leur com­mune en­trée en sixième au Lycée Louis le Grand, et cela sem­blait si loin qu'on pou­vait presque le con­fondre avec une première prise de con­science. C'avait été, dès le dé­but, une curieuse asso­cia­tion que Richard n'avait tenté de dé­finir tant il s'y trou­vait à l'aise depuis tou­jours. Et rien n'avait changé, mal­gré bien des écueils où d'autres au­raient som­bré. Les pa­rents de Richard étaient aisés et avaient lé­gué à leur fils unique une

solide affaire facile à gérer, d'un excellent rapport. Sylvain, fils de petits fonctionnaires, avec deux frères et une sœur, se contentait d'un emploi sans grand avenir dans un ennuyeux Ministère. Richard s'était marié, Sylvain était encore célibataire.

Pourvu qu'il ne se marie pas! songeait parfois Richard qui envisageait alors tous les changements qu'entraîneraient cet acte. Il ne lui semblait pas que son propre mariage ait amené quelques différences dans leurs relations. Sylvain avait accepté Juliette et Juliette avait accepté Sylvain, au même titre que Richard. Et la vie continuait à trois, agréable et facile, comme elle l'avait été pour deux, précédemment.

Le coup de sonnette tira Richard de cette rêverie et lui rappela l'absence de Juliette. Il regarda sa montre. Onze heures moins dix.

Sylvain entra sans dire un mot et Richard baissa la tête comme s'il était coupable de la disparition de son épouse. Sylvain alla s'asseoir sur le tabouret du piano et Richard qui, jusqu'alors n'était guère plus qu'agacé, sentit les larmes lui monter aux yeux. Sylvain le regarda quelques secondes et détourna les yeux.

« Ecoute, Richard... » commença-t-il.

« Je suis sûr que Juliette me trompe! » murmura Richard en découvrant ainsi la possibilité.

« Ecoute, Richard », reprit Sylvain, « Juliette est chez moi et je suis venu pour te chercher. Nous avons à parler tous les trois ».

Richard ouvrit la bouche sans rien trouver à dire.

« Chez toi? » prononça-t-il enfin.

« Oui ».

« Mais pourquoi faire? »

Sylvain faillit lui rire au nez.

« Tu veux rire », cria Richard qui comprenait enfin.

« J'en aurais grand besoin car l'affaire est fort drôle! »

Richard s'en retourna vers le fauteuil de cuir et s'y laissa tomber.

« Ecoute, Sylvain, je crois qu'il vaudrait mieux que tu t'en ailles; j'ai besoin de réfléchir ».

« Je suis venu pour te chercher et n'ai pas l'intention de te laisser tout seul ici. Je te l'ai déjà dit, nous avons à parler tous les trois. D'ailleurs, Juliette t'attend ».

« Je n'irai pas ».

« Pourquoi? »

« Je ne veux plus vous voir ».

Sylvain se mit debout.

« Peut-être as-tu raison. Mieux vaut que je te laisse. Adieu Richard ».

« Salaud! »

Sylvain se retourna et lui fit face. Puis, haussant les épaules il lui dit:

« Pauvre Richard, tu ne peux pas comprendre ».

Il sortit.

« Allo? Sylvain? »

« Oui ».

« Ici Juliette ».

« Ah! Comment allez-vous? »

« Pas très bien. J'ai besoin de vous voir ».

« Mais ... quand vous voudrez ».

« Vous êtes gentil. Hé bien, je suis au café qui fait le coin. Vous sortez à six heures, n'est-ce pas? »

« Oui ».

« Alors je vous attends ».

« Entendu, à tout à l'heure ».

Juliette quitta la cabine téléphonique et se lava les mains au petit lavabo qui lui faisait face. Elle s'examina dans la glace. Quoi de changé en elle maintenant qu'elle avait téléphoné? Depuis qu'elle avait pris la décision, la nuit dernière, elle avait, de minute en minute repoussé son exécution. Enfin, la chose était réglée, il ne restait plus qu'à attendre.

Elle regarda sa montre. Six heures moins cinq. Sylvain serait ici dans un quart d'heure au plus. En remettant un peu

de rouge sur ses lèvres pâlies elle sentit que ses mains se mouillaient. Mais elle saurait bientôt et cela lui rendit courage. Il n'y avait qu'un quart d'heure à attendre.

Elle revint dans la salle et s'assit. Le garçon s'approcha.

« J'attends quelqu'un », murmura-t-elle et rougit comme d'avoir avoué quelque faute.

Au dessus du bar trônait une pendule. Et cela ne voulait rien dire car elle marquait déjà six heures et quart quand la montre de Juliette n'était encore qu'à six heures une.

Elle tenta d'imaginer le bureau de Sylvain où jamais encore elle n'avait pénétré. Il lui manquait tant de choses au portrait de Sylvain ! De le voir plusieurs fois la semaine n'avait jamais suffi à remplir le grand cadre qu'il lui paraissait mériter. Mais devait-elle vraiment souhaiter mettre en lumière tous ces recoins non encore devant elle dévoilés ? Certes, elle ne doutait pas que Sylvain fut un être à multiples étages ; on le sentait à ses regards, au son de ses paroles, aux gestes de ses mains, mais ces étages que le public n'abordait pas, avait-elle à gagner d'y monter ?

« Bonjour, Juliette ! »

Il lui semblait toujours qu'il éprouvait quelque difficulté à prononcer son nom, car il était un peu ridicule et son auréole romantique, croyait-elle, gênait Sylvain qu'elle imaginait sensible à ces détails. Combien, tout au contraire, Richard se plaisait à murmurer « Juliette » chaque fois qu'il le pouvait.

« Bonjour Sylvain ».

Il s'assit sur la banquette à côté d'elle et elle l'examina en dessous, heureuse de retrouver le même costume un peu usé, l'une des sept ou huit cravates qu'elle lui connaissait et la moustache qui cachait mal une large cicatrice dont elle ignorait l'origine.

« Sylvain, je voudrais vous poser une question ? »

Il eut un regard interrogatif et attendit.

« Cela va peut-être vous paraître ridicule, mais c'est très important pour moi ».

« Je vous écoute ».

Il m'écoute, pensa-t-elle. Bien sûr, il ne peut faire autrement, mais cela suffit-il? Ne faudrait-il pas qu'en cet instant il soit tout entier suspendu à mes lèvres, que ses oreilles se bouchent et que ses yeux se ferment, que son esprit s'arrête et que seuls son cœur et sa chair entendent ce que j'ai à lui dire?

« Il s'agit de Richard », dit Juliette.

A nouveau, le regard de Sylvain lui fit comprendre qu'il attendait le reste.

« Sylvain, vous aimez Richard? »

« Oui, bien sûr..., et non ».

Elle le regarda; son cœur se mit à battre; c'est maintenant...

« Sylvain, je voudrais savoir... »

Oserait-elle le dire? Cela pourrait-être si monstrueux. Et pourtant.

« ... je voudrais savoir qui, de lui ou de moi est votre but et votre obstacle ».

Il lui prit la main et la serra brutalement.

« Que voulez-vous dire? »

« Qui aimez-vous, lui ou moi? »

La honte qu'elle ressentit de sa question lui fit retrouver son orgueil. Elle redressa la tête, prête à livrer bataille.

Sylvain relacha son étreinte.

« Je n'ai rien à répondre. Cela ne vous regarde pas »

« Cela ne me regarde pas? Vous voulez rire? Depuis quatre ans que Richard et moi sommes mariés vous êtes là devant nous et moi je ne sais que faire de vous, je ne sais que penser, je ne sais même plus qui aimer? »

« Taisez-vous, je ne veux pas savoir ».

« Et moi, je veux savoir. Sylvain, répondez-moi, qu'aimez-vous? »

Sylvain tira son portefeuille et mit un billet sur la table.

« Venez », dit-il, « ce ne sont pas des choses que l'on confesse dans un café ».

« Allo, Françoise? »

« Oui ».

« Ici Sylvain. Ecoute, je crois que je ne pourrai pas venir dîner ce soir. Ça t'ennuie? »

« Bien sûr, gros bête, mais ça ne fait rien, viens demain si tu peux ».

« Merci, tu es un ange. Je te retéléphonerai demain. Bonsoir grande sœur ».

« Au revoir, petit frère ».

Il raccrocha et, de nouveau, s'interrogea. Pourquoi libérer sa soirée? Le coup de téléphone de Juliette engageait tout au plus vingt minutes à passer devant un verre d'apéritif! Et pourtant... Jamais encore elle ne l'avait invité à la retrouver seule, et qui plus est, hors de chez elle. Ses coups de téléphone fixaient soit un dîner, soit une sortie au théâtre, soit une promenade en voiture, le dimanche après-midi. Mais un rendez-vous dans un café... Qu'allait-il imaginer? Probablement Richard avait-il été désagréable et tout simplement, elle s'adressait à lui qui le connaissait bien, pour arrondir les angles. Il se prit à sourire. En dépit de leurs quatre années de mariage Richard et Juliette avaient encore des pudeurs de jeunes époux. Il leur fallait un intermédiaire pour régler leurs querelles! Mais non, c'était ridicule, il savait trop combien Juliette veillait à la bonne entente du ménage. Jamais, en sa présence, n'avait eu lieu la moindre hausse de ton. Alors, pourquoi viendrait-elle exposer à lui, qui n'y pouvait rien, ses petits désaccords conjugaux? La chose devait-être beaucoup plus sérieuse. Et puis sa voix, tout à l'heure au téléphone... Cela valait bien de ne pas dîner chez Françoise aujourd'hui.

Il rangea les papiers traînant sur son bureau et se leva. Dans deux minutes la sonnette lui rendrait sa liberté. Nerveusement il alla vers la fenêtre et fixa, dans la cour, les voitures rangées en file d'attente. Deux minutes... Et si je n'y allais pas? pensa-t-il.

La sonnette retentit. Sylvain mit son imperméable et quitta son bureau. Les couloirs s'emplissaient de bruit de pas, de voix nerveuses. Il traversa la cour sans rien voir que la porte cochère qui, ce soir, ouvrait sur l'inconnu. Il tra-

versa la rue. Au coin, il y avait le Café. Au travers de la vitre, il reconnut Juliette qui fixait la pendule.

Juliette ne dormait pas. Contre son bras, le souffle régulier de Richard manifestait son inconscience. Il y avait dans le noir, une image qui la fuyait et qui, pourtant, ne quittait pas les alentours du lit.

« Je connais ce fantôme », disait-elle à la nuit qu'elle ne pouvait percer. Et le fantôme continuait à danser et Juliette ignorait quel était le cerveau qu'il espérait hanter.

Était-ce un visiteur appelé par Richard dont le sommeil ne prouvait pas l'âme innocente, un visiteur qu'elle savait déceler en dépit de la nuit et de sa transparence?

Était-ce un visiteur pour elle?

Pourquoi ne dormait-elle pas? Une fois encore elle étudia tous les détails de la soirée passée. Ainsi qu'à l'ordinaire Richard était rentré vers les sept heures. Gertrude préparait le dîner dans la cuisine et elle-même écrivait au salon cette lettre à Denise, depuis si longtemps due. Richard l'avait embrassée sur le front, l'air un peu distrait puis il était retourné dans l'entrée et la porte qu'il avait voulu refermer s'était, à nouveau, entre-ouverte sans qu'il y prenne garde. Elle l'avait entendu téléphoner.

« Allo, Sylvain? Ici Richard. Comment vas-tu?... Comme-çi, comme-ça. Je voudrais bien te voir... Tout à l'heure, après le dîner, tu es libre? ... Parfait. Alors, à tout à l'heure. Et merci! »

Et ces phrases, fort banales, avaient tout déclenché. Était-ce parce que Richard avait voulu fermer la porte? D'ordinaire, il ne prenait pas tant de précautions pour téléphoner à Sylvain. Et pourquoi cet empressement? Il avait vu Sylvain le Dimanche précédent et dans deux jours, on allait tous ensemble au théâtre?

Je suis ridicule, murmura Juliette, pour la centième fois. Pourquoi Richard ne téléphonerait-il pas à Sylvain qui est son meilleur ami depuis bientôt vingt ans, s'il a certains en-

nuis qu'il aime autant ne pas me dire? Depuis vingt ans! Ils sont amis depuis vingt ans! Et moi, je les connais depuis cinq ans à peine. Je les connais? C'est vrai, je les connais, puisque Richard m'a présenté Sylvain huit jours après notre rencontre. Témoin, garçon d'honneur etc. C'est tout juste s'il n'était pas du voyage de noces...

Oui, bien sûr, ce fantôme qui tournait autour d'eux... Etait-ce vraiment la première fois qu'il troublait son sommeil?

Dès que Richard fut parti, elle reprit la lettre à Denise, interrompue la veille au soir. Qu'avait-elle à lui dire? Denise était une lointaine camarade de Lycée qui avait épousé un colonial. Et maintenant, perdue au centre de l'Afrique, elle réclamait à ses anciennes amies des nouvelles parisiennes.

Certains jours, Juliette savait admirablement détailler ses menues occupations citadines et donner un charme tout particulier aux événements locaux auxquels elle avait assisté. Mais que dire aujourd'hui? Elle relut les quelques lignes déjà écrites et déchira. C'était tout autre chose qu'elle avait sur le cœur. Elle écrivit:

'Chère Denise, Il me semble que tu connais bien mal mon mari alors que je n'ignore rien du tien. C'est de Richard dont je voudrais te parler aujourd'hui, bien qu'entre lui et Paris il n'y ait d'autre rapport que celui de ville à l'habitant. Tant pis pour toi, il me faut une confidente. Il se trouve que je te dois une lettre, tu es donc toute indiquée. Richard a 29 ans, il est grand, plutôt blond et très beau. Cela paraît stupide de dire: il est très beau, mais, si je n'appuyais pas sur ce point tu ne pourrais jamais savoir qui est Richard. Il est très beau et la première fois que je l'ai vu je l'ai voulu. Cela veut dire que nous nous sommes mariés. Aucune difficulté pour ce faire: lui et moi appartenions au même cercle de gens fortunés, catholiques tous les deux, du moins de forme, libres, désireux de s'installer dans l'existence. A vingt cinq ans, dans notre monde, on n'envisage pas d'autre

issue que le mariage. Donc, la décision fut prise et je fis connaissance de Sylvain. Pour Richard c'était la consécration. Il me l'expliqua ainsi: Sylvain est mon meilleur ami, nous nous connaissons depuis quinze ans et si je vous présente à lui c'est qu'entre vous et moi les choses sont sérieuses.

Sylvain me plut, je ne saurais dire pourquoi. Il n'est pas très beau mais il a des yeux. C'est quelque chose qui manque un peu à Richard. Il a aussi une moustache que je n'aime pas, mais elle est destinée à cacher une large cicatrice qu'il a au-dessus de la lèvre. Etrange cicatrice; il me semble qu'elle a un sens que je ne comprends pas et, cependant, je voudrais tellement savoir...'

La colère montait en lui comme jamais il ne l'avait connue. Il vit la pierre devant lui, sur le petit mur. Il la prit et la lança de toute sa force, de toute sa rage. Sylvain la reçut en pleine bouche et ne jeta qu'un cri. A cinq mètres de distance ils se regardèrent sans comprendre. Richard vit le sang qui coulait de la lèvre de Sylvain. Déjà sa chemise était tachée. Des gens venaient. Richard se précipita. Tout ce sang qui coulait, le sang de Sylvain, du sang perdu. Non, je ne veux pas. Richard prit dans ses bras le garçon qu'il venait de frapper et but à cette lèvre ouverte le sang qui s'échappait. Sylvain se raidit et se libéra. Il sortit un mouchoir de sa poche qu'il posa sur sa lèvre et dit:

« Allons chez un pharmacien, ce n'est rien. Ne pleurez pas ».

En fait, il fallut trois agraffes et la cicatrice demeura. Mais Richard l'oublia autant que la raison de sa colère.

Mais au fond du fauteuil de cuir, il sentait à nouveau, la froideur de la pierre et l'envie lui revenait de la lancer.

'... Sylvain est célibataire et habite tout seul un petit appartement où je ne suis jamais allée. Je sais que Richard y va souvent mais il ne m'en dit rien. Au reste, cela n'a

pas grande importance; je vois assez Sylvain comme cela pour me passer d'aller chez lui. En général il vient dîner le Mercredi, et le Dimanche nous prenons l'auto et nous allons nous promener tous les trois, un peu partout, au goût de Richard qui conduit. Et nous n'allons jamais au théâtre sans qu'il vienne avec nous. Ce serait, pour beaucoup, un exemple parfait pour un ménage à trois. Et c'est là que j'hésite. Qu'y a-t-il entre eux deux? Où suis-je moi-même? Cannaïst-tu les hommes, Denise? On dit tant de choses sur leur compte, et nous, pauvres femmes, nous avons tout juste droit de regarder, de les aimer, mais que doit-on attendre d'eux? Sylvain me regarde parfois et j'ai peur. Ils ont entre eux tant de secrets, tant d'années que j'ignore, tant de gestes qui, pour moi, sont muets.

Aujourd'hui, je veux savoir, mais ma sœur, que vais-je apprendre?

Sur l'enveloppe elle écrivit: Monsieur Sylvain L... avec l'adresse.

Puis elle ouvrit la cheminée, mit le feu à la lettre et regarda brûler.

Il était dix heures du matin. Elle alla à la cuisine, prévint Gertrude qu'elle ne rentrerait pas déjeuner et, de retour au vestibule, décrocha le téléphone.

« Allo, Sylvain!... Sylvain, j'ai besoin de toi ».

Bien sûr, elle n'avait pas fait le numéro. Il faudrait bien pourtant s'y décider avant midi. Elle s'habilla avec l'espoir de trouver le courage nécessaire à l'appel. Rien n'y fit. Je vais sortir, pensa-t-elle. Lorsque j'aurai marché un peu, ce sera plus facile.

Dehors, elle essaya de réfléchir. Pourquoi, après quatre ans de vie paisible et bien réglée, découvrait-elle un gouffre qu'elle avait, jusqu'alors, côtoyé sans le voir? Le vertige la prenait. Elle activait le pas mais elle se voulait brave. Pour ne plus avoir peur il lui fallait descendre jusqu'au fond et déchirer le noir. Je veux savoir, répétait-elle, je veux savoir. Et puis, qui sait ce qui pourrait jaillir de cette connaissance? Un frisson joyeux la parcourut. Mais peut-être aussi...

Cependant qu'elle marchait, passant chaque café, consciente de le fuir, elle repoussait au soir l'appel qu'elle avait voulu faire avant midi. Tout serait plus facile et l'entrevue n'aurait pas de limite.

Elle décida d'entrer au Bon Marché pour déjeuner d'un bord, puis elle s'y fit laver la tête et faire les mains. Cela lui reposait les nerfs et justifiait, à ses propres yeux, sa longue absence de chez elle. Elle y prit même le thé et songea à l'achat d'une robe, mais rien ne lui plaisait.

A nouveau dans la rue, elle fuyait les pendules, craignant de les voir trop proches de l'heure inexorable qu'il lui fallut tout de même constater.

« Allo, Sylvain? »

Cette fois, elle venait de composer le numéro.

Sylvain finissait de boire son café comme Richard sonnait à sa porte.

Avec un demi sourire amusé il alla lui ouvrir, anticipant, sans trop de peine, les problèmes qu'on espérait lui voir résoudre.

Richard avait son air ennuyé des grands jours et Sylvain se demanda s'il n'avait pas sous-estimé la raison du déplacement de son ami.

« Veux-tu du café? » demanda-t-il.

« Non, merci, je ne pourrais pas dormir ».

Richard s'assit et, quelques secondes, garda le silence. Il cherchait ses mots.

« Vois-tu, Sylvain, j'ai peur de ne plus aimer Juliette ».

Sylvain qui remportait sa tasse à la cuisine s'arrêta net. Il n'avait jamais envisagé semblable possibilité.

« Tu n'aimes plus Juliette? »

« Je ne dis pas cela! Je t'ai dit: J'ai peur de ne plus aimer Juliette, ce n'est pas tout à fait la même chose ».

« Je comprends! » murmura Sylvain en quittant la pièce.

Et même, il comprenait très bien. C'était toujours la même histoire avec certains embellissements. Il regagna la

chambre. Richard, visiblement, attendait son jugement et Sylvain, sachant fort bien ce qu'il fallait lui dire, hésitait. Tant de choses se mêlaient dans sa tête que sa langue se brouillait. Il se taisait et Richard attendait.

« Est-elle moins belle qu'avant? » demanda-t-il enfin en regardant ailleurs. « A-t-elle vieilli? Serait-elle devenue méchante? »

« Non, pourquoi? »

« Je cherche des raisons à ton amour fuyant. Mais, au fait, de quand date cette facheuse constatation? »

« C'était hier quand... »

« Hier! »

Sylvain se mit à rire et Richard, tout d'abord surpris, en fit autant.

« Que je suis bête, mon pauvre Sylvain! Tu vois, je suis un peu fatigué et, tout de suite, je me fais des idées parce qu'hier, en embrassant ma femme, je n'ai pas ressenti tout à fait le même plaisir. Mais tu vois, il suffit que je vienne te voir, tu me dis trois phrases et tout s'arrange. Qu'est-ce que je deviendrais sans toi? »

« Et moi donc! »

Ils se partagèrent un sourire, si vieux pour l'un et l'autre, que réellement, ce n'en était qu'un seul.

Un bon moment, ils demeurèrent à bavarder avant que Richard ne s'en aille.

Lorsque Sylvain eut refermé la porte, il murmura pour lui-même:

« Ne plus aimer Juliette, serait-ce possible? »

Rêveusement, il promena un doigt entre les poils de sa moustache, tout au long de la froide cicatrice.

Le problème ainsi posé, que restait-il à faire? Lentement, Sylvain ouvrait sa porte, ne sachant plus ce qu'il allait trouver chez lui. Juliette, oui, bien sûr. Mais était-ce bien la même qu'il avait abandonnée une heure plus tôt, pour aller chercher Richard? Il ne ramenait pas Richard et rien n'al-

lait comme il l'avait imaginé. Tout à l'heure, en sortant, il envisageait une longue conversation raisonnable dont il serait sorti vainqueur, car il ne doutait pas du bien fondé de tous ses arguments. Mais c'était oublier un peu vite de quoi Richard était bâti, ne plus voir en soi-même qu'un désir trop longtemps comprimé et maintenant envahissant.

Il avait fallu le froid de la rue, la morne attente de Richard, son air de croire tout arrangé du moment qu'il entrait et surtout, son incrédulité totale, même en dépit de ses insultes. Richard souffrait de constater combien Sylvain avait insisté pour lui faire croire quelque chose que lui-même se refusait d'envisager mais non vraiment de l'infidélité possible de sa femme. Et ce faux éclairage liait Sylvain au personnage que l'on souhaitait lui voir jouer.

Juliette était là, inquiète, presque tremblante, attendant, elle aussi, qu'il la sauve. Mais de quoi, mon Dieu, sinon de lui? Que serait donc la vie: Richard rejeté à lui-même et Juliette qui ne saurait s'empêcher d'y penser?

Maintenant, ce qu'il allait dire, le regretterait-il? Oui, tous les jours, à coup sûr, mais ne vaut-il pas mieux l'absence totale qu'un corps dont l'âme est loin? Un examen plus long aurait été souhaitable mais le temps ne s'y prêtait pas. Et c'est si drôle de se croire large et généreux!

« Ma petite Juliette, je crois qu'il vaut mieux que vous rentriez. Richard vous attend. Il ne sait rien ».

« Oui, Sylvain, vous avez raison, je vais rentrer. Mais ne croyez vous pas qu'il vaudrait mieux lui dire? »

« Pas à Richard! Il est de ceux qui préfèrent ne jamais voir ce qui pourrait les ennuyer. Gardez-le comme il est, il en vaut bien un autre ».

« Au fond, vous le détestez? »

« Non, je l'aime, et plus que vous, peut-être. Vous voyez, je réponds à la question de tout à l'heure: c'est lui que j'aime, mais il n'y a pas d'obstacle, car le but est atteint depuis le premier jour. En dépit des escapades, il est beaucoup trop tard pour changer de chemin ».

« Allo, Richard! Excuse moi pour tout à l'heure, je m'y suis très mal pris. Je voulais tout simplement te dire que Juliette, comme toi hier, avait des doutes. Elle est venue me demander conseil, mais tu connais les femmes, elles ont vite fait de se mettre à l'envers, elles pleurent, elles se fâchent et ne veulent rien comprendre. Aussi, faut-il plus longtemps pour tout remettre d'aplomb. Enfin, la chose est faite et je te la renvoie saine et sauve et crois-moi, elle t'aime comme tu l'aimes ».

« Et comme je vous aime », ajouta-t-il quand il eut racroché.

C'en était fait. Mais on avait tiré leçon de l'aventure car, désormais, on saurait bien qu'il est inutile d'envisager comme habitables des châteaux en Espagne...

Mais comme était étrange la fatalité des choses établies! Si ç'avait été lui qui, le premier, ait rencontré Juliette... et qu'elle se soit offerte à Richard? Mais non, avec Juliette il ne pouvait plus y avoir de Richard! Il aurait fait... Il aurait dit...

Mais à quoi bon!

« Sylvain, voulez-vous que nous dinions ensemble? »

« Mais Richard... »

« Richard ne m'attend pas. J'ai prévenu Gertrude ».

« Venez chez moi, là seulement je pourrai vous parler ».

Sylvain arrêta un taxi; ils y montèrent en silence et leurs mains se cherchèrent. Sylvain était brutal dans sa pression et la douleur de Juliette lui donnait envie de se jeter contre lui, et les minutes du trajet parurent des heures.

Elle n'était jamais venue chez Sylvain et fut surprise, habituée qu'elle était à son large appartement, de constater combien réduits semblaient les lieux: une entrée, une chambre, une cuisine-douche et c'était tout.

« Je gagne environ le quart de ce que touche Richard à la fin de chaque mois! » dit-il, vaguement amer.

« Il me semblait pourtant que vous étiez plus intelligent que lui ».

« Le suis-je vraiment? Je l'ai cru quelque temps, mais s'il faut en juger d'après les résultats, il doit y avoir mal-donne quelque part. Mais que nous importe. Vous êtes là et les lieux vous surprennent. Vous auriez dû venir plus tôt, en d'autres circonstances, aujourd'hui nous nous serions passés de cette surprise ».

« Sylvain, vous n'avez pas répondu à ma question de tout à l'heure, et je veux une réponse ».

« Vous tenez tant que cela aux questions et aux réponses? Ne vous suffit-il pas d'un geste... ou d'un baiser? »

« Sylvain... »

« Juliette, nom charmant et ridicule et qui vous va si mal. Juliette, j'embrasse Juliette et je n'aime pas Juliette qui n'est qu'un nom. Mais ce que j'embrasse ce n'est pas Juliette, c'est vous et vous toute entière qui tenez dans mes deux mains. Vous n'êtes plus Juliette, ce n'est plus que vous et je ne suis plus moi. Mais qui suis-je en vous? »

« Sylvain, Sylvain... »

« Ne m'appelle pas, je ne suis pas lui. Sylvain n'est plus, le monde n'est plus, nous ne sommes plus rien. Reste là, ne bouge plus, ne dis rien, sans nom et sans visage dans la nuit, rien que nous pour toujours et sans un mot ».

Et puis, le long silence, et puis... et puis.

Et puis le téléphone.

Non, maintenant je ne veux plus me souvenir.

DYLAN THOMAS

THREE LETTERS

I

The Boat House,
Laugharne,
Carmarthenshire,
Wales,
October, 1951

My Dear Madame Caetani,

Thank you for your telegram from Paris. And I hope my letter, addressed to Brown's Hotel, was forwarded to you.

This is a difficult letter to write, because I am asking a great request of you.

But let me first explain. The enclosed manuscript is called, as you will see, « Llareggub. A Piece For Radio Perhaps », though the title is most provisional. * And it is the first half of something I am delighting in doing and which I shall complete very shortly. Only very special circumstances — and I'll tell you of them in a moment, if I may — are preventing me from carrying on with it every minute of the working day.

I told you, as you may remember, that I was working on a play, mostly in verse. This, I have reluctantly, and, I hope, only temporarily, abandoned: the language was alto-

* It was ultimately changed to *Under Milk Wood*.

gether swamping the subject: the comedy, for that was what it was originally intended to be, was lost in the complicated violence of the words: I found I was labouring at each line as though I were making some savage, and devious, meta-physical lyric and not a play at all. So I set the hotchpotch aside, and am prepared to wait.

But out of my working, however vainly, on it, came the idea of « Llareggub ». (Please ignore it as a final title). Out of it came the idea that I write a piece, a play, an impression for voices, an entertainment out of the darkness, of the town I live in, and to write it simply and warmly & comically with lots of movement and varieties of moods, so that, at many levels, through sight and speech, descriptions & dialogue, evocation and parody, you came to know the town as an inhabitant of it. That is an awkward & highfalutin way of speaking: I only wanted to make the town alive through a raw medium: and that, again, is wrong: I seem hardly able to write today, or, at least, to write *about* Llareggub: all I want to do is to write the damned thing itself.

Reading (as I hope you will) the first half of this piece as it stands, you'll see that I have established the town up to a certain moment of the morning. And the effect you will find, probably, rather jerky and confusing, with far too many characters and changes of pitch and temper. But the piece will develop from this, through all the activities of the morning town, — seen from a number of eyes, heard from a number of voices —, through the long lazy lyrical afternoon, through the multifariously busy little town evening of meals & drinks and loves & quarrels and dreams and wishes, into the night and the slowing-down lull again and the repetition of the first word: Silence. And by that time, I hope to make you utterly familiar with the places and the people; the pieces of the town will fit together; the reasons for all these behaviours (so far but hinted at) will be made apparent; & there the town will be laid alive before you. And only you will know it.

Let me particularise, & at random. As the piece goes

on, two voices will be predominant: that of the preacher, who talks only in verse, and that of the anonymous exhibitor and chronicler called, simply, 1st Voice. And the 1st Voice is really a kind of conscience, a guardian angel. Through him you will learn about our Edwards, the draper, and Miss Price, the sempstress, & their odd and, once it is made clear, most natural love: Every day of the week they write love letters to each other, he from the top, she from the bottom, of the town: all their lives they have known of each other's existence, and of their mutual love: they have seen each other a thousand times, & never spoken: easily they could have been together, married, had children: but that is not the life for them: their passionate love, at just this distance, is all they need. And Dai Bread the baker, who has two wives: one is loving & mothering, sacklike & jolly: the other is gypsy slatternly and, all in love, hating: all three enjoy it. And Mrs Ogmores-Pritchard who, although a boardinghouse keeper, will keep no boarders because they cannot live up to the scrupulous & godlike tidiness of her house and because death can be the only boarder good enough for her in the end. And Mr Pugh, the schoolmaster, who is always nagged by his wife and who is always plotting her murder. This is wellknown to the town, & to Mrs Pugh. She likes nagging; she likes plotting, in supposed secrecy, against her. He would always like plotting, whoever he lived with; she would always like nagging, whoever she lived with. How lucky they are to be married. And Polly Garter has many illegitimate babies because she loves babies but does not want only one man's. And Cherry Owen the soak, who likes getting drunk every night; & his wife who likes living with two men, one sober in the day, one drunk at night. And the cobbler who thinks the town is the wickedest place to live in the world, but who can never leave it while there is a hope of reforming it; and, oh, the sav[i]our his cries of Gomorrah add to the pleasures of the little town wicked. And the old woman who every morning shouts her age to the heavens; she believes the town is the chosen land, & the

little river Dewi the River of Jordan; she is not at all mad she merely believes in heaven on earth. And so with all of them, all the eccentrics whose eccentricities, in these first pages, are but briefly & impressionistically noted: all, by their own rights, are ordinary & good; & the 1st Voice & the poet preacher, never judge nor condemn but explain and make strangely simple & simply strange.

I daren't look back over what I have written: I wrote it v. quickly, & most probably it reads like nonsense. But I *terribly* want to finish the piece. And it *will* be good (of its own kind.) And this is where my great request of you at last comes in.

Can you pay me — and, I am sorry, *at once* — for this half of « Llareggub » just as though it were finished? For without being paid well and at once, I cannot finish it.

In the middle of next week, we finally leave Laugharne for London. I mean, we *have* to leave: the house is sold. But still, I *cannot* leave without paying the whole of the debt I owe to this town. And they amount to about a £ 100. If I can pay this, we can leave for London, where I have borrowed a flat, and I can get on, at once, with the rest of « Llareggub ». Oh, I want to so much. I can finish it in two weeks. But only if I can settle all up here.

I know the amount I am sending you of Llareggub (and of course, quite possibly the quality: you may loathe the thing) is not worth a £ 100. But what I want is to be paid now for the *whole* piece in advance. Is that possible? I am pinning every bit of faith on to that.

Can you cable me your answer?

Wouldn't it be awful if you thought the whole thing bunk. My head is full of it, I *must* go on.

Please forgive this letter

Ever,

Dylan.

The Boat House,
Laugharne,
Carmarthenshire,
Wales.

6 November 1952

My dear Marguerite Caetani,

It was beautiful to have your letter, and it made me a hundred times more ashamed of that were possible, of my wretched, long, dark silence. Your letter was so warm, and good, as though I had never been barbarously bad to you at all, and as though, almost, I was forgiven for the breaking of promises, the filthy discourtesy incomprehensible to me also, even the whole head years' dumb insult itself. It was beautiful to hear from you. I don't deserve one warm word but only bashing on the head and an forgetting cold as ice. I don't understand why I never wrote, why I never wrote if only, explain, to explain why I could not, at that time, in spite of my promises, finish the second half of my piece for you. Many times I began a letter, and then put it aside because the piece was not finished. And the drafts of letters piled up, and time lapped on and thickened, putting on skins of distance, and daily, and even more so nightly, I grew more ashamed of my silence and more angry with procrastination until, at last, I couldn't write at all. I buried my head in the sands of America; flew over America like a damp, moping bird; boomed and giddled while home was burning; carried with me, all the time, my unfinished letters, my dying explanations and self-accusations, my lonely half of a loony maybe-play, in a heavy, hurtful bunch. These trich griefs were always with me, and hispered loudest in the late night when, indeed, was all sand. 'Put it off, put it off', 'It's too late now', 'you can never be forgiven',

THREE LETTERS

II

The Boat House,
Laugharne,
Carmarthenshire,
Wales.
6 November 1952

My dear Marguerite Caetani,

It was beautiful to have your letter, and it made me feel a hundred times more ashamed, if that were possible, of my wretched, long, dark silence. Your letter was so warm, and good, as though I had never been barbarously bad to you at all, and as though, almost, I was forgiven for the breaking of promises, the filthy discourtesy incomprehensible to me also, even the whole dead year's dumb insult itself. It was beautiful to hear from you. I don't deserve one warm word but only bashing on the head and then forgetting cold as ice. I don't understand why I never wrote, why I never wrote if only to *explain*, to explain why I could not, at that time, in spite of my promises, finish the second half of my piece for you. Many times I began a letter, and then put it aside because the piece was not finished. And the drafts of letters piled up, and time lapped on and thickened, putting on skins of distance, and daily, and even more so nightly, I grew more ashamed of my silence and more angry with my procrastination until, at last, I couldn't write at all. I buried my head in the sands of America; flew over America like a damp, ranting bird; boomed and fiddled while home was burning; carried with me, all the time, my unfinished letters, my dying explanations and self-accusations, my lonely half of a loony maybe-play, in a heavy, hurtful bunch. These ostrich griefs were always with me, and whispered loudest in the late night when, indeed, I was all sand. 'Put it off, put it off', 'It's too late now', 'You can never be forgiven', 'The past is as dead as you'll be', 'Burn the daft drafts, unwind the half-play in your head so that nothing's left', 'Forget, you damned Welshcake, for doom'll nibble you down to the last crumb', 'Strangle your litter of wits in a

sack, and splash! » — these agenbite-deadeners did their long-night worst, but the little voice in the dark, old throb, throb it went across Kansas and in all the ovens of the hotel bedrooms. (These pages, I think, are wilting in the grey nearly permanent drizzle that sighs down on to this town and through the birdscratched matchboard roof into my wordsplashed hut. It isn't rain, it must be remorse. The whole fishy bay is soaked in guilt like the bad bits of poems not-to-be oozing to the marrow on the matchsticked floor, and the half-letters curling and whining in the warped drawers. I'm writing this guilty noise in a cold pool, on a November afternoon, in mists of depression. Forgive me even for this if you can. I find my pitiful wallow in the drizzle of regret an indulgence I can't pity. This weather gets me like poverty: it blurs and then blinds, creeps chalky and crippling into the bones, shrouds me in wet self, rains away the world).

I can't explain why I didn't write to explain why I couldn't finish the piece. (No, I can't explain. When I try to explain my fear, the confused symbols grow leaden and a woolly rust creeps over the words. How can I say it? I can't. I can say: One instinct of fear is to try to make oneself as little, as unnoticeable, as possible, to cower, as one thinks, unseen and anonymous until the hunt is past. My fearful instinct is to bloat myself like a frog, to magnify my unimportance, to ring a bell for a name, so that, as I bluster and loom twice my size, the hunt, seeing me monstrous bays by after different & humbler prey. But that is not what I mean: the symbols have wet-brain, the words have swallowed their tongues).

All that I can't explain. But why I didn't finish the piece there and then, as I said I would, is another matter. I was, as you know, leaving home — though, am, miraculously, home again now in this tumbling house whose every broken pane and wind-whipped-off slate, childscrawled wall rain-stain, mousehole, knobble and ricket, man, man-booby and-rat-trap, I know in my sleep. I was leaving, for ever it seemed, had nowhere to go, nothing to go with, and

THREE LETTERS

after you had wonderfully helped me to pay off some of my many debts here, I went to London, which, to me, is nowhere, and lived by odd reviews — and they were odd, too — odder broadcasts, pretending to women's clubs putting off, putting off, all the nasty time, the one thing I wanted to do: finish my piece for you, and make my peace. But nothing could happen. Then I went to the States with my luggage of dismays and was loudly lost for months, peddling and bawling to adolescents the romantic agonies of the dead. I made money, and it went, and I returned with none; and once more, with the unfinished letters, poems, and play weighing much more heavily now on a mind nearly out of its mind with its little, mountainous anxieties and aches, reviewed, begged, lectured, broadcast, waited, with no hope, for the time when I could come back here and write truly again. I waited, and I put off, full of fear and wishes.

It is all a very inadequate explanation, and it cannot call itself an excuse, and indeed my fears are inexcusable though very real to me in their mean, mad way. And my talk, though terribly but weakly true, of 'putting off' all the time, is terribly putting off, I know.

These are the reasons, however — and expressed in depression and with little hope of them being believed or thought worthy — for my silence and my broken promises. About John Davenport and René Char, I had heard nothing until your letter; and, even if I had heard, how could that, in any way in the world, affect you and me: your goodness to me, your faith in me, and my affection and gratitude kept, so it would appear, so obstinately secret?

I'm trying to work again now, and faithfully promise you the rest of the thing, and whatever other work I have, by, at the latest, the first of February. I won't fail you. Or have I joined forever the folds of the snarling and letting-down black once-friendly sheep? Oh, I do hope not.

It is so difficult for me to live and keep my family alive. There are many petty jobs which would make me

just not enough money for tradesmen and rent, for clothes and school, for parents, shoes, and cigarettes, but these petty jobs, by their nature and by the time they claim, stop me writing as I would wish to write. But how, without these jobs, am I to live, to write, at all? These problems keep me treadmilling small nightmares all the waking nights.

About another visit to the States, I don't know. Though I can only play a poet there, and not make poetry, yet there I can, if only for a few months, live and send money home. I may have to go again. I cannot go on thinking all the times of butchers and bakers and grocers and cobblers and rates and rents until I bleed. After I have finished what I am now working on, I may have to give up writing altogether. (My need — as I imagine it — to write, may be all conceit. The bellows that fan the little flicker is nothing but wind, after all. And writing is certainly not one of the ancient secrets of the head-shrinking tribes. Ach, my endless bleating of private woes because I am not « allowed » to write, as though the trees would grow inward, like toenails, if I renounced this passion for self-glorification. « Peace, let me write. Gag the tradesmen, I must write. Alms, for the love of writing ». Perhaps I should be better off pulling teeth. But even this momentary disgust I blame upon the weather. And even this disgust is « material for writing » just as trees, and toenails, and glorification, and teeth). I think it's time to stop this. I wanted, at first, only to say that I am profoundly ashamed of my silence and of my broken promises, and that I will not fail you again, and that I do, with all the bloody muscle of my heart, ask for your forgiveness. But the letter got caught up with my despairs, though, always, I want, one day, to write you a happy letter. Because I am very often happy, and not always, here by the sea, without cause.

Please forgive me, and try to trust me again.

The old, cold pool of the day is a little warmer now.

Yours ever,

Dylan.

III

Dear Marguerite Caetani,

What can I say?

Why do I bind myself always into these imbecile grief-knots, blindfold my eyes with lies, wind my brass music around me, sew myself in a sack, weight it with guilt and pig-iron, then pitch me squealing to sea, so that time and time again I must wrestle out and unravel in a panic, like a seaslugged windy Houdini, and ooze and eel up wheezily, babbling and blowing black bubbles, from all the claws and bars and breasts of the mantrapping seabed?

Deep dark down there, where I chuck the sad sack of myself, in the slimy squid-rows of the sea there's such a weed-drift and clamour of old plankton-drinkers, such a mockturtle gabble of wrecked convivial hydrographers tangled with polyps and blind prawns, such a riffraff of seabums in the spongy dives, so many jellyfish soakers jolly and joking in the smoke-blue basements, so many salty seadamaged daughters stuffing their wounds with fishes, so many lightning midnight makers in the luminous noon of the abysmal sea, and such fond despair there, always there, that time and time again I cry to myself as I kick clear of the cling of my stuntman's sacking. 'Oh, one time the last time will come and I'll never struggle, I'll sway down here forever handcuffed and blindfold, sliding my woundaround music, my sack trailed in the slime, with all the rest of the self-destroyed escapologists in their cages, drowned in the sorrows they drown and in my piercing own, alone and one with the coarse and cosy damned Seahorse dead, weeping my tons.'

What can I tell you? Why did I bray my brassy nought to you from this boygreen briny dark? I see myself down and out on the sea's ape-blue bottom: a manacled rhetorician with a wet trombone, up to his blower in crabs.

Why must I sparable my senseless silence? my one long trick? my last dumb flourish? It is not enough that, by the wish I abominate, I savagely contrive to sink lashed and

bandaged in a blind bag to those lewd affectionate raucous
stinking cellars: no, I must blare my engulfment in pomp and
fog, spout a nuisance of fountains like a bedwetting whale in
a blanket, and harangue all land-walkers as though it were
their shame that I sought the sucking sea and cast myself out
of their sight to blast down to the dark. It is not enough to
presume that once again I shall weave up pardoned, my
wound din around me rusty, and waddle and gush along the
land on my webbed sealegs as musical and wan and smug
as an orpheus of the storm: no, I must first defeat any hope
I might have of forgiveness by resubmerging the little arisen
original monster in a porridge boiling of wrong words and
make a song and a dance and a mockpoem of all his fishy
excuses.

The hell with him.

This third letter, reprinted above in its entirety, is among the last that Dylan Thomas wrote. It was brought to London and delivered to his agent, David Higham, by Ruthven Todd. Mr. Higham forwarded it to me.

M. C.

VERNON WATKINS

ELEGY FOR THE LATEST DEAD

for Dylan Thomas

*Over this universal grave the sky
Brings to the grieving earth its great reward,
And it was right to lay ambition by,
The strongest will being deep and the way hard.
This body sleeping where the dead leaves lie
Gives back to trees from colours they discard
The patient light of its own penury
Out of whose silence wakes the living word.
And we who wake, who saw the swallows' wings
Seeking the turning-point of their own cloud,
Draw to one place his love of vanished things.
It is not this that leaves the heart's way ploughed;
It is the shade the sun no longer flings
Of one who touched the humble and the proud.*

*That cry comes back, by one no longer heard
Who, more than many, loved the wandering bird.
He knew it when it rose and crossed the bay
Echoing and calling, falling far away.
Though cold and bright, how suddenly it brings
The music back of secret, bubbling springs.*

*The sand itself was golden, and the sea
Caught the calm grains and hid them silently.
Alone I hear it now, alone I hear
A curlew call the unreturning year;
An alien voice, an alien cry, and yet
Known to these waters. And the rocks are wet
From the last wave which, blinding me with foam,
Has left a brilliance where no foot may come.*

*When first we met, this is the path we took,
Exchanging thoughts, when, with a sudden look,
He showed Earth shining like an open page,
A myth in his live hand too young for age.
His stubborn zeal transformed archaic skill,
Binding young words old courses to fulfil
Held by the curb of his unvarying soul
Which kept all majesty in pure control
While each excursion gave them fiery blood.
Above this path, high on the cliff we stood
That day, competing who could further cast
A knife-edged stone. That knife-edge whistling past,
Singing through air, hit rocks and water now.
He crouched, and listened for the scream below.*

*If the wrong world, if man's abuse of man
Cast its own shadow on the race he ran,
Here he forgot it. Here above the slade
Sprang to immediate life his talking shade,
The forward-looking shade accompanied
By all the imagination in its greed
Which, on the long, bare cliff-walks we enjoyed,
With living shapes would dramatize the void.
And I recall one late October day
When, going to bathe, he peopled the whole bay
(It was already dark) with human brutes*

ELEGY FOR THE LATEST DEAD

*Feeding in silence, in correct grey suits,
Compact and patient, one with sanguine sighs
Offering the next a sandwich of dried eyes.*

*I take the watery glass of hours for theme
Fixed, where the heron stoops above the stream.
His quick imagination in that glass
Could make of every form that he saw pass
A timeless image in the living mind.
Each moment all is judged. No man can find
An exit from the circle he is in
Of time, for timeless vision to begin.
Yet, though all faded, still I count it pure
To have loved the valid fact, made that endure
Which held his heart and fixed the heron's eye.
Who now says nothing says as much as I.
Whatever books men write, when all is said
There are no words to mourn the latest dead.*

DAVID PAUL

THE KITE

Mrs. Wilkes the cleaner stepped out of the door of the monument, duster in hand. Before polishing the bronze plaques she glanced round her, and down the wide flight of stairs at her feet, leading to the square and opening on to a vista of church spires, houses, wharves, the harbour, and beyond it a faint line of sea. She turned and surveyed the statues overhead, shrugging her mannish shoulders, pressing her thin lips to her false teeth. In the strong morning light, the pockets under her eyes were more than usually marked. Her glance travelled up the shining stone-trouser legs of the central figure, past the frock-coat, up the wide-fronted stone shirt to the benevolent side-whiskered face, down his right sleeve to the large knotted-veined hand in whose grip a fresh bunch of violets had been placed. He seemed to be offering them to one of the stone deities at his feet. The draperies were sliding from her classic haunches, a knot of hair was falling down the immense, curving back. Her Greek profile, eighteen inches high, turned a look of irrelevant nobility past the knees of the central figure, and gazed unseeing at the elaborate, renaissance roof of an insurance building which stood at the corner of the square below. It was eleven o'clock in the morning, an hour when it seemed as if everybody was too busy to be about. So Mrs. Wilkes spat with security, without needing to look round, keeping her

eyes fixed on the violets, while she drew out a cigarette and lit it. Her look hardly expressed surprise or interest. It merely fixed itself on something not usual. It would fix itself there until the object became usual, or her mind would move on slowly to a conjecture as to how the object came there.

But there was someone about after all. « Hi, there's nobody inside. What do you want? »

A man who looked rather like a seal, and who stood looking intently at his feet as if surprised that they were not flippers after all, was listening at the door of the monument, his hand raised ready for another knock. At Mrs. Wilkes's voice he turned round, elaborately surprised, and rushed forwards almost on tiptoe.

Between and above them a slow curve of string descended, slackening and tightening, lifting a little and falling a little. It was being regularly tugged past, a tug with each slight lift. Carrying a long tail tied regularly with paper ribands, each one a different colour, a large, pink heart-shaped kite drew by overhead in long hovering pulls, sufficiently near for the secretive whispers, the whipping and rustling of its tail to be heard as it passed.

Having approached Mrs. Wilkes, the man paused, suddenly distracted, giving his mind to something else. « What, » he said, pointing at the presences on the monument, « do you suppose they represent? » It was hard to say from his tone whether the question was a request for information or a prelude to it.

« Represent? » said Mrs. Wilkes. « Represent. They don't look as if they could help themselves, never mind represent. Can't even keep their hair tidy. Him in the middle, he doesn't seem to be taking much notice of them. So why are they showing all their muscles? Every time I clean the bird lime off their bosoms, I think the mayor and corporation ought to be ashamed of themselves. »

« So ought the birds! » The seal-man's face twisted and wrinkled like a comedian's, and his body shook with a wheezy jingle. « Oughtn't they? Still, they say it's lucky. »

« Lucky who for? I don't see where the luck comes in. And what were you knocking at that door for? We don't know each other, do we? »

« I wanted to know how you liked the violets. »

« So it was you, was it? Well, I want to know when you put them there. I'm surprised at a man your age. I thought it must have been one of the students again. One day I found those two women with towels tied round their bosoms! »

The seal-man looked up at the kite as it swam with circular sidling movements into the dazzling sky, the tail twisting and following its progress. Now it stood almost still in the air, vibrating faintly like an ethereal heart on the transparent blue.

« Well, what did you mean by it? »

The seal-man withdrew his mind from the sky to a consciousness of Mrs. Wilkes; looked at the monument, grinned, buttoned his coat, drew his thick brows together in a pantomime of concentration, put an elbow in one hand and pressed a finger to his temple, tapped it, drew the finger down to his mouth and back again, let his eyes wander, then fix themselves on an invisible object drawing away to infinity following it until they had almost reached that point, then withdrawing in a flash of recollection.

« I'll tell you, » he said, as if at once making a confession and divulging a delightful secret. « Do you know who this man was? »

« It tells you on the inscription. Sir Miles Mellory. »

« Exactly. And do you know who he was? »

« We both know. Sir Miles Mellory. That doesn't get us any further. »

« My good woman, » said the seal-man, « Sir Miles was the flower of knighthood, the prince of benefactors, the delight of all charitable institutions, the mint and pattern of millionaires, the enlightenment of all manufacturers. »

« He was your grandfather, » said Mrs. Wilkes. « What are you selling? And why can't you answer a simple question? »

without so much palaver? I've got my work to do, you know.»

« So, it seems, has somebody else! »

Wearing a little red skirt, a blue-striped blouse and a red fez, a monkey came darting and scrambling, rattling a money-box. At the same moment, like a wheel with musical spokes beginning to turn past a stiff plectrum, quickening as it turned into a clanking waltz, a barrel-organ started up.

Mrs. Wilkes's shoulders started to sway in an ironical waltz rhythm. « Now we're off, » she said. « Take your partners! »

With its red skirt drawn out along its lifting and falling tail, the monkey ran from one to the other, proffering its money-box, keeping up a constant bird-like chatter, its features working with a rapidity and a meaning neither human nor animal. Then it gave up an activity which it could only not understand, and feeling in the pocket of its blouse with long spidery fingers, retrieved a nut, cracked it, with lips quivering over its pink gums and yellow teeth, spat out the shell and ate the nut with electric speed, searched for another, failed, more and more frenziedly, to find one, and then, screaming reproachfully, its long arms wafting, loped towards Mrs. Wilkes.

« Get away! I haven't anything for you. » Ululating like a prophet misunderstood, the monkey seized her skirt and examined it before she snatched it away.

« Might be your grandfather, » the seal-man nudged himself and smiled into space. « There seems to be something between you! »

Having passed the limits of its desperation, the monkey flung down its fez, and its money-box, and made for the monument, floating on the stilts of its long arms. Then, as if climbing an invisible rope, it swarmed up the side of the monument with noiseless speed and climbed out on to the top of the central figure. Hunched on Sir Miles's shoulder, it looked something between a supernatural emanation and an omen. Against the smooth sky its furriness was more furry, the red and blue of its dress were brighter. With one arm

hooked round the statue's head it uttered a series of long hooting howls at the sky, lifting its tiny face into emptiness, the oval eyes shrinking and disappearing over the lifting lip. The china music of the hurdy-gurdy drew nearer, and paused with a scattering spangle of notes.

« Your familiar, » said the seal-man to the organ-grinder. « seems to have been seized with a fit of restlessness. »

« How long is he going to stay up there? » Mrs. Wilkes was relieved to have the monkey at a certain distance, and annoyed that he should be trespassing.

Like a magnetized ball the monkey silently rolled down the side of the monument, along the pavement and up the side of its owner. Sniffing and thrusting out his lower lip, he waved his retrieved money-box superciliously at Mrs. Wilkes.

« Knows his business when he sees me, » said the hurdy-gurdy man. « Hardly ever have to call him. » Without looking, he handed up nuts which were snatched before they were offered. Mrs. Wilkes considered the fallen shells. Feeling probably that he had not been rewarded enough for further conversation, the organ-grinder began to move on. The monkey fell, with the inevitability of an expert tumbler, down his back and followed, wafting the money-box in one hand and a bunch of violets, which it sniffed with interest, in the other.

At the same moment a dark, bilious-looking young man who might just have been wakened from a belated snatch of sleep, came round from the back of the monument as if he were carelessly answering a summons or an invitation, and leaned against its base, relapsing into an attitude of conscious and habitual waiting.

« Hallo, here's the poet again, » said Mrs. Wilkes.

« I suppose you can tell I'm a poet by my green hair. »

« It looks pretty black to me. What have you been up to, Adelbert? »

« I am never up to anything. In any sense of the term, it seems. »

« You can't not do anything. »

« I've been sitting at the feet of Sir Miles — behind him, it's true, examining my consciousness, and picking my nose. »

« Well, there you are. »

« Yes, here I am. »

« Feeling better for it? »

« This conversation is leading nowhere. An interesting direction. Let's go on. What have you been doing? Shall I tell you? »

« It wouldn't be all that difficult to guess. »

« Nothing. »

« On the contrary, » said the seal-man. « We've been having an interview with a monkey. »

« And his organ-grinder, » said Adelbert.

« Yes, I agree! » The seal-man felt he had quickly grasped a point. « It would be hard to say which of them belongs to the other. It's a case of mutual indispensability. But the organ-grinder hardly accorded us an interview. A pity. He must be one of the last of his kind. A dying art! »

« Did you give him anything? »

« I really don't think we did. The monkey gave us no time to think of that. »

« Then he was neglecting or rather defeating his proper function. »

« I'm sure he had a flea, » said Mrs. Wilkes. « The way he behaved. »

« Shall I tell you the truth of the matter? Monkey feels something is missing from his life. He accommodates himself to the lack, more or less. But sometimes, at some mysterious juncture of events or moods which can't be calculated or explained, he is seized with a panic hunger, a hunger that must find voice and movement, that drives him hither and thither howling, in search of — »

« Well? » said Mrs. Wilkes.

« I don't know. You don't know. He doesn't know. »

« So we can't help each other? »

« How true. Yet we can't do without each other, can we. »

« There are lots of things and people I could do without. I can tell you. »

« No, don't tell me. You cannot see their necessity, that's all. So you naturally think they are unnecessary. »

« This conversation, » said Mrs. Wilkes, looking as if she were sitting in an arrested roundabout, « is getting us nowhere. »

« I told you it would. »

« So what do we do now? »

« Turn back. Didn't you know that is why space is curved? Because it cannot arrive nowhere. It has to turn back on itself. »

Mrs. Wilkes looked round her for curves, and found none, until her eyes rose suspiciously to the presences on the monument. So that was what they represented. Space going nowhere. Or on its way back.

« Yes. » Adelbert had followed her eyes. « The curves of perfection turn back on themselves with never a contradiction — or only with minor contradictions that are supposed to be perfection in themselves. »

« Supposed to be. Supposing I was to go up and sit beside those two? »

There was a pause while all three considered this surprising suggestion, Adelbert feeling he could imagine perfectly the possible results — Mrs. Wilkes in her best, looking fey and fearful in a leaf-brown hat and a piece of fur, awaiting, fortified by a small whisky, the attack of an invisible camera.

« No, » he said finally, withdrawing his eyes from the vision. « You are, if anything, a Rodin. You couldn't put yourself next to an outsize Canova. It simply wouldn't do. »

« Quite impossible! » said the seal-man in vague but emphatic agreement. He was absently staring down the four flights of empty stone steps at his feet. At the bottom of them he could just see the head and shoulders of a boy, who might have been playing a solitary game of tug-of-war on an invisible rope, or perhaps ringing an urgent, soundless

peal of bells from somewhere in the inaccessible depths of sky. Looking beyond and above him, for some other motive, his eyes lifted to the kite. Still high over the cobbled streets round the harbour below, it was almost on a level with where he stood. He watched it drawing rhythmically forward, its tail curling and lifting from side to side, as if approaching against its will at the summons in his look. Another glance down found the boy half a dozen steps higher, still struggling against a sky that was now not empty, crouching backwards, climbing the stairs slowly backwards, step by step. The kite slithered alarmingly sideways and down in a sudden give of the wind, and then settled itself again to the same anxious, forward heartbeat. Now the boy was climbing steadily, with a shortening or two of the string at each groping step; and all three at the top were watching the curious race between the kite's steady descent and its owner's struggling climb, waiting for the inevitable moment when the kite, lowering through the shallows of wind, would swoop and founder, gracefully — but perhaps fatally — to the ground somewhere below.

« Now what in the world do people fly kites for? » demanded Mrs. Wilkes. « Even little boys? »

« No one in the world, » said Adelbert, « would quite be able to give an adequate answer to that question. It must be one of the fundamentals. »

« For pleasure, for pleasure! » the seal-man soothed. He was watching with envy. « Though I *have* heard that meteorologists — »

« But where's the pleasure, I ask you, in a bit of paper on a string? »

« Where, indeed, » murmured Adelbert. « Where is the pleasure in vicarious flight, in hanging one's heart — on a piece of string, too! — into the sky? »

The kite, as it shivered and fell, was near enough for them to hear its frail clatter, and all three of them were simultaneously, in their different ways, anxious, sorry — and relieved when they could see that it had not caught or damaged

itself in any way. The boy ran down the steps, winding string as he went — and the kite, as such things will, gave a final horizontal lift of flight away from him before its capture. Then he came running back up the steps, holding it against one shoulder where it flapped and rustled like paper wing as he came panting to the top.

« Now why aren't you at school? » Mrs. Wilkes looked magisterial, but one of her eyelids drooped.

The boy smiled under his thick hair at each of the three in turn. Strange, harmless creatures. What did they matter? Since he was the centre of their attention, they must be silly. But of course there were moments like this, when grown-up people looked at you as if you had just happened for the first time, and it made you feel as if you had. A pleasant feeling. You knew you had been remarkable all the time of course, ever since you could remember. But it had gone on for so long without being noticed, that you had almost forgotten the fact when other people came to notice it. However strange everything is in your own mind, you can't quite let in its strangeness — even though you see it there all round you — until someone else gives you the word. And then you knew all the time how strange a world it is.

And maybe the strangest thing of all is that people older than you are always telling you the reason for everything. Explaining. That's what they seem to think they are there for. That's why there are schools. And of course you have to get in on the explanation, even if you don't believe it. You won't belong if you don't know the code, and you might as well know it, so that you can belong whenever you care to. But nothing that's explained is quite true, and the explanation's often so far-fetched and hard to learn that while you are learning it you forget all about the thing it's supposed to explain. That's why teachers and nearly all grown people seem to have forgotten all about everything — so that they can talk about it all the time. But when you wake in the dark with the pillow hot and shaking under your head, after some happening in sleep you can't remember, and you feel

your way with your finger to the point in your chest where the shaking comes from, there's no talk there. No kind of reasonable talk that anyone could explain to you. It's like the noise of the sea under the pier, or the thud-thud from the dark windowless cabin over the stream among the moors, where you were alone, one afternoon on holiday, a beating that darkness inside your head while you listen to it coming back at you from the hillside. So that it's inside and outside you at the same time, making you feel thin and unreal between two unseen hammers, beating against you hard, but with no more weight than breath, while you stand fixed, looking at the tall old foxglove that no one has ever looked at before, growing as high as yourself in the moist shade between three bushes.

You wait while the hammers beat you thinner and thinner until you are almost not there at all, and there's nothing, nothing to explain.

And here was this woman — not to be taken seriously, she looks like the school care-taker — standing with her elbows out in a question, demanding an explanation why. Why were you flying that kite? she means. As if there were any reason. The thing to do was to get by these people — or else maybe linger a little and find them out. Or was that done already? They were harmless, these; not like the old man you found out so that you wanted to spit, spit at the shoes he kept touching with the tip of his stick — and once he even touched yours. It looked as if the only trouble with these three was that they didn't have anything much to do; simply stand and breathe at you.

« Let's look at your kite, » said Adelbert, hands in pockets, with the friendly-uncle approach of the newly mature to the still very young.

The boy held the kite out at arm's length, where it swung crookedly on the hinge of his fingers. Its coarse paper cracked in the wind, and the tail shirred softly to itself on the pavement.

« Did you make it? » Adelbert took it between his hands and studied it as if it were a picture. The boy nodded.

« You can see that with half an eye, » said Mrs. Wilkes.

« I've got two eyes. » Adelbert looked at her over its rim, making her blench with the feeling of an accusation. And certainly the boy looked hurt. He was holding his immense ball of string in both hands now, and he had the stretched, wary look children have when someone takes hold of one of their private possessions — the most secret, but the most examinable part of oneself. And the most precious, because it could so easily be taken away. Adelbert tested the kite for balance in the hollow of his hand, swooped it gaily into the wind. « How high can you fly it? »

« I've got five hundred yards of cord. One day it nearly caught on a plane. I saw the man looking out. He waved at me. » That had clearly been a sign from heaven, a salute from some cloud-sauntering demigod.

« It might have caught and carried you off with it, » said Mrs. Wilkes.

« I wouldn't have let go. This cord's as strong as anything. »

« And where would you be now? »

They both pictured the possibilities, the boy with delight, the woman with mock dread and real disapproval.

« I might have landed anywhere! »

« And then? »

« Anything might have happened! »

« So few things do, don't they? » murmured Adelbert. « But while they don't, I think it's very nice to have a kite. I envy you. Far better than fishing. You don't have to catch anything. » He handed back the kite with consideration.

« But he nearly caught an aeroplane! » Mrs. Wilkes objected.

« Exactly, » said the seal-man, « he that expecteth little. »

« Well, I'd rather have another way of going to heaven! » The thought in her words, after she had uttered them, made her look suddenly pious, proper and hopeful.

Something shook in Adelbert, and was stopped; and shook again more violently; his eyes shot out wild appeals for help, at the boy, at the sky beyond him; but clearly none, short of a miracle, was to be had. Inner convulsions rose up and out, engulfing him in spasms of silent laughter.

« Now what's got him, I wonder? » Mrs. Wilkes demanded with patience. « The milk boiled over, dearie? »

« I'm sorry — I was just — » he gasped between gasps, « I was just think — I was just thinking of your — your assumption! » After a long, tearful pause for breath, groping for a handkerchief, « No strings, » he added mysteriously, and even more helplessly, « no s-s-s-strings attached! » He trumpeted loudly into his grey handkerchief.

« Well I never. It looks as if I ought to go on the halls! »

But the laughter spread. And too much success, in an unexpected role, can be annoying. It made her begin to feel that it was time to disperse this gathering. After all, it had gathered round her. The thought made her authoritative. « What a morning, what with monkeys and kites and — » She looked, without naming names, at the other items that had made the morning what it had been. They were sobering rapidly. The flick of her duster cracked a silence.

An inner gurgle, born of hunger or repressed eloquence, made the seal-man pat his torso reassuringly and button up his coat. He glanced up at the sky as if to make sure of the right time. « Well, » he began on a bell-like, valedictory note, « now we can all go our several ways — excepting Sir Miles and his lady friends, of course, and, and, » he scrutinised himself, searching vacuously for a stray thread, a suitable phrase, « and consider the incident as closed. »

« What incident? » said Mrs. Wilkes. « What happened? Can anybody tell me? »

« The answers come and go, » said Adelbert, drifting away on a quotation, « the question stays. »

Without bothering to understand him, Mrs. Wilkes seemed to take the latter part of his words very much to himself.

DAVID GASCOYNE

ELEGIAC IMPROVISATION ON THE DEATH OF PAUL ELUARD

*A tender mouth a sceptical shy mouth
A firm fastidious slender mouth
A Gallic mouth an asymmetrical mouth*

*He opened his mouth he spoke without hesitation
He sat down and wrote as he spoke without changing a word
And the words that he wrote still continue to speak with his
mouth:*

*Warmly and urgently
Simply, convincingly
Gently and movingly
Softly, sincerely
Clearly, caressingly
Bitterly, painfully
Pensively, stumblingly
Brokenly, heartbreakingly
Uninterruptedly
In clandestinity
In anguish, in arms and in anger,
In passion, in Paris, in person
In partisanship, as the poet
Of France's Resistance, the spokesman
Of unconquerable free fraternity.*

*And now his printed words all add up to a sum total
 And it can be stated he wrote just so many poems
 And the commentators like undertakers take over
 The task of annotating his complete collected works.
 Yet the discursivity of the void
 Diverts and regales the whole void then re-enters the void
 While every printed page is a swinging door
 Through which one can pass in either of two directions
 On one's way towards oblivion
 And from the blackness looming through the doorway
 The burning bush of hyperconsciousness
 Can fill the vacuum abhorred by human nature
 And magic images flower from the poet's speech*

*He said, « There is nothing that I regret,
 I still advance, » and he advances
 He passes us Hyperion passes on
 Prismatic presence
 A light broken up into colours whose rays pass from him
 To friends in solitude, leaves of as many branches
 As a single and solid solitary trunk has roots
 Just as so many sensitive lines cross each separate leaf
 On each of the far-reaching branches of sympathy's tree
 Now the light of the prism has flashed like a bird down the
 dark-blue grove
 At the end of which mountains of shadow pile up beyond
 sight
 Oh radiant prism
 A wing has been torn and its feathers drift scattered by
 flight.*

*Yet still from the dark through the door shines the poet's
 mouth speaking
 In rain as in fine weather
 The climate of his speaking
 Is silence, calm and sunshine,
 Sublime cloudburst and downpour,*

The changing wind that breaks out blows away
 All words — wind that is mystery
 Wind of the secret spirit
 That breaks up words' blind weather
 With radiant breath of Logos.
 When silence is a falsehood
 And all things no more named
 Like stones flung into emptiness
 Fall down through bad eternity
 All things fall out and drop down, fall away
 If no sincere mouth speaks
 To recreate the world
 Alone in the world it may be
 The only candid mouth
 Truth's sole remaining witness
 Disinterested, distinct, undespairing mouth
 « Inspiring mouth still more than a mouth inspired »
 Speaking still in all weathers
 Speaking to all those present
 As he speaks to us here at present
 Speaks to the man at the bar and the girl on the staircase
 The flowerseller, the newspaperwoman, the student
 The foreign lady wearing a shawl in the faubourg garden
 The boy with a bucket cleaning the office windows
 The friendly fellow in charge of the petrol station
 The sensitive cynical officer thwarting description
 Like the wellinformed middleclass man who prefers to remain
 undescribed
 And the unhappy middleaged woman who still hopes and
 cannot be labelled
 The youth who's rejected all words that could ever be spoken
 To conceal and corrupt where they ought to reveal what
 they name.

The truth that lives eternally is told in time
 The laughing beasts the landscape of delight
 The sensuality of noon the tranquil midnight

ON THE DEATH OF PAUL ELUARD

*The vital fountains the heroic statues
The barque of youth departing for Cytheria
The ruined temples and the blood of sunset
The banks of amaranth the bower of ivy
The storms of spring and autumn's calm are Now
Absence is only of all that is not Now
And all that is true is and is here Now
The flowers the fruit the green fields and the snow's field
The serpent dance of the silver ripples of dawn
The shimmering breasts the tender hands are present
The open window looks out on the realm of Now
Whose vistas glisten with leaves and immaculate clouds
And Now all beings are seen to become more wonderful
More radiant more intense and are now more naked
And more awake and in love and in need of love
Life dreamed is now life lived, unlived life realised
The lucid moment, the lifetime's understanding
Become reconciled and at last surpassed by Now
Words spoken by one man awake in a sleeping crowd
Remain with their unique vibration's still breathing enigma
When the crowd has dispersed and the poet who spoke has
gone home.*

PAUL ELUARD has come back to his home the world.

BURNS SINGER

THE LOVE OF ORPHEUS

To Hugh Macdiarmid

Hang it all, Robert Browning,
there can be but the one 'Sordello',
But Sordello, and my Sordello?

EZRA POUND

*See, he is stooping. A thousand flavours rise
In the sun, melt away in his singing mouth,
Yet he bends down hard as potato-pickers for wages,
This slim stark god antiquity makes gorgeous;
And supple as sand in the sweet sway of his youth
He follows his woman through final immensities.*

*Among brown roots, brown hair of the new to die,
Roots of some streets as well as trees, like lice
He crawls an intruder, bold and alive; he clinks
In his clothes, heavy as heels with coins, trinkets,
Tokens, embarrassed to anger by luck of their noise
As he falls like an army on final immensities.*

*Then the long passage of colliding souls,
The deeper dead who meet in the dark to growl,*

THE LOVE OF ORPHEUS

*Gossip and kiss: he crowds among them too. No!
They frighten him. He stops. They almost grow
Weapons and limbs, lampposts gone on the prow,
But are motionless, pitiful, thin there and savagely cold.*

*Or, if he moves at all, like water bread
Goes pale and salt, comes back and eddies forth
Through tumbling ghosts of worried men... among
Them sinking slow: through songs that are scraping his tongue,
With his breath clotted as bones, wild faith in her worth,
Wild grief in her death, Orpheus sways tormented.*

*Times to go back to labours innocent
As seedlings, birds at song in the sunlight pecking,
Layers of daybreak building up a square
To the great traffic trundling everywhere,
Times to go back creep up at each step taken.
Yet he, for her fair-headed sake, descends*

*Always again towards the final immensities.
No, not for her. Rather for any, all
Comfort or cubicle, shelter from ghosts with their guilt:
A conscript boy, called-up from his mother's milk
To be suckled till death to murder, knows as well
The man he shoots as Orpheus what he seeks.*

*That he discovers later. Imagine now
And now, and now, and now trials he takes
Backwards and forwards, nearer, then the river
Wrapped in its delicate climate, seeing him, shivers.
His young face trembles in the wrinkled wake
Of Charon's steerage, going slow and slow.*

*And frogs, and frogs, the chatter and clatter of frogs,
Creaking and croaking — a musty mahogany flamework,
Victorian sideboards crashing to ashes and more
Sinking the roof to the floor, gurgle and roar:
— A house falls in on his head, braining the framework,
Or, heavily, steadily, water, dropping by drops.*

*Quite suddenly it stops. He stands bewildered.
As if an army at the pitch of battle
Simply forgot to fight, stood still to wonder
Fearlessly at the dead, he turns almost as tender,
Shades are whining like women, shawls on their brittle
Bodies, shuffling like gravel, like biscuits, like childhood,*

*Loud and embarrassing underneath his ears
Noisy and old and cold as all of us.
And these were the cute ones! swift with enchantment! press
Of life's wine, the white and the red of the blood! these
Were his mistresses, gentle ones, hard ones to please!
They lie like linen that can't dry for showers*

*Or stiff as soldiers ice has cooled, but dead,
Always, as dolls. O is it love then or shame
That drives him like snow towards the final immensities?
His least step now, these last perplexities
Will finish, be folded away, revealing the doomed
House, pillar on plain black pillar, black instead.*

*Even then the bricks can sparkle, sharp and tiny,
Intense or less intense. It is as though
A scaffolding of cobwebs, mite by mite,
Holds busy masons who surpass the night
In spidering silence, erect a climbing glow
That sparks where darkness hits it, black and shiny.*

*Sheen of the dark-edged stones, shine that reflects,
Mirror by river, the lips of the dead, the palace
Black as bee's stripes, to Orpheus hidden in prayer.
He cannot quite remember who or where,
Why, what or how he is, he comes, but always
His journey, that's heavy and hard to bear, connects,*

*Makes sense; for the first time only he knows he is there.
There are quiet attendants to greet with a sleek smile
This thumbnail digger who tunneled away on his own:
The passages grow wide to hasten him in,
And a king waits silent, eyes, hands, legs, all still
In a storm of stillness, dead steady, like animals stare.*

*« Because she loved me, because she is dead, I have come. »
From all that's question, somewhat like a diver
Dipping for pearls by Capricorn or Cancer,
He chose just that one sentence for an answer,
Chose it as swarthy hunters choose to deliver
Their bodies to hazard the sea, one place in the foam.*

*And the natural glance of an oyster's cargo and trove
Was laid ajar by his jump, his hurried answer.
She rose in her perfumed image, ikon glow,
Delicious and severe, to undergo
The praise and faith that fell from him like dancers,
High-fevered dancers, leaves, the fall of love.*

*« For otherwise than women's lovelight glistens
She had an eye — the marrow of a sunbeam —
That even under eyelid harnessed rainbows,
And her long lashes were like pointed rain.
Her tugging pulse, together tender skin
Lay fine as fur, the channels of her wrist.*

*Quick as a lemon the taste of her tongue, her teeth
 Were gentle as milk. Sweets of her blood; they swayed
 A tree of smiles, delved rivers in her face,
 Cupped hands like petals filled and fresh with grace,
 And voices I had lost one voice were made,
 A multitude with banners and a faith.*

*O why enumerate the special parts?
 She was good land, fragrant, where fertile skies
 Let fall their various wonders, sun and rain:
 With red abandon like a poppy when
 She curled close about me, breast and thighs;
 Now gold abundance on the thresher's cart. »*

*And for that second through eternity
 The dead are easy. Tantalus' scorched lips
 Suck comfort in. The sisters of the well
 Sit on their steps and laughs to be in Hell.
 The love of Orpheus like an ointment drips
 On the sores of the ghosts throughout final immensities.*

*Hush at a far-fetched zenith, climb as soft
 As the tumultuous treading upwards, on,
 Of busy sunlight through the freckled earth.
 Then, very humanly, shuffling backwards and forth
 On bony arguments to hold his own,
 He tricks to persuade through many elaborate shifts.*

*« The naked treachery of every vice
 Has sweated through my skin. This small white body,
 These blue eyes, are nowhere ignorant.
 Hell would itself seem almost arrogant
 To boast such pensioners, to hold such bloody
 And obscene delights, such pettiness.*

*« Cheat, and a liar, and irresolute
Even in evil, a traitor and a coward,
Stupid, incapable, tantalised by thoughts
Too big and honest, loyal to deceit
Down to the hem I kiss that death's embroidered:
From head to foot a queer and shallow brute.*

*Yet I near her am cleansed, like molten ore
Into her body's metal am there cast
To an alloy that's precious and powerful, moulded and proof.
I, who am most unworthy of her love,
Am by that love made worthy of the rest,
Am onewhere raised, one way brought near, held home.*

*In the belled silk of her body, bobbin and round
Cocoon, I am made precious a maker as works
With fibres and gums in the green on the mulberry's leaves;
And because there is one who lives left believes
In the strength of his purpose the sun goes daft as a bird
And gay right through the good and evil earth.*

*And men are in our lives worthy, and gentle as olives,
And money grows fruitful and free, its paper is pulp,
And the healing faith I instil, that I have in them,
Is given and taken without caution or shame.
I beg! I beg! but only for her help
To construct a new kind of riches where death is absolved.*

*Think of the thick of it, brim to the bottom of luck,
For your black sheriffs a battle, final allegiance
Of millions transmuted to what our minute fulfils.
See how they congregate? The weight of all
Their holiness brings tribute to your patience
Must change your jealousy to miracle.*

*Otherwise there is nothing I can do
 With the sullen shapes of a sun I cannot distinguish.
 I'd better come to an end to plead like a pauper
 For a place by her feet whose fate cannot be altered.
 Then maybe somebody will, in the toss of anguish,
 Remember Orpheus was cheated once by you*

*And be afraid to follow after him. »
 But Pluto smiled and mumbled mistily:
 « You talk of faith. Well, have some faith in me
 And you will have her back. Now, let me see?
 Go on ahead. She'll follow bye-and-bye.
 No, not just that. This isn't quite a whim.*

*Think deep in love and you will understand.
 All that the sun does not see, that is mine:
 If you look back what follows is your hope
 And, should you see it, is within my grip.
 She, who once was, will wait you in the sun.
 Think deep in love. This has not been determined. »*

*The ghosts now are gone in their magical wardrobes most
 peaceful
 Parade of their habits to sleep, sleep deep, as he passes.
 They are so still and white it is as though
 Loud swooping waters stiffened at a blow
 And, in a tempest's uproar, salt white horses
 Stopped dead in their mid-prance and listened for only a
 breeze.*

*Or is it nearer like a little child
 Who, having howled and huffed the evening out,
 Is the poor rascal midnight finds asleep
 Upon her pillow far too tired to weep?*

THE LOVE OF ORPHEUS

*As Orpheus leads upwards like a shout
And his wife follows, quiet, of their kind.*

*Like a Yankee Clipper over a summer sea
In his silver journeys, beside her, that great god moves
Who whistles winds that whine but come to heel.
Only there are no colours, no silver or steel,
But only a blur that they swerve into like leaves
Stripped for a race and racing from the tree.*

*A blankness numb as a star, and, like a star
In stillness, is not still through lack of motion
But because of the unmoving distance
Cannot move, or seem to move, is pasted
Millions of years of light away, in rotation
That's faster than ours, is held there, still as a star.*

*And through this quietness three quiet bodies
Move with one footstep nobody can hear.
A spangled hall, the circus silence when
Three acrobats are up, one rope begins
To stagger underneath them and you hear
The audience grow silent with applause*

*Would, in this context, be a fireside chat.
For, as each step grows longer by a heartbeat,
A hair's breadth further back goes Orpheus' thought,
Till like long hair a gale has straightened out
His sense of sound is struggling flimsily backwards
Searching some definite sign, some final support.*

*But there is nothing. Silence is everywhere.
Not even a cough to excuse it, not even a fight,*

*Jabber of gossip feuds to reassure him
 That maybe their footsteps are lost, that voices obscure them.
 If she were there she'd call, she'd cry, and yet...
 Long tongues of doubt, milk-mad, or jabbed with fire,*

*Thousands a moment, press, impress his mind.
 If by a miracle of mere mistake
 Its answer should be wrong, there is no man
 Who, with the dead about him, will again
 Achieve such strength to choose, or, choosing, take
 So great a risk of being twice condemned.*

*First he is sure that somewhere there behind
 She is alive and coming after him.
 Soon in the sunlight — will it be by nightfall? —
 They in twin terror fastened for a while
 Will walk the various world, have children and fame,
 All the round riches gather ever designed.*

*But, as the silence has it otherwise,
 He will alone learn how the gods can cheat,
 Their mercies worse than man's mere cruelty.
 His life will be lived with shy ghosts who defy
 Death by inanity, whose closed lives defeat
 Each motion in him from his loneliness.*

*And yet... O maybe like a sound too high
 For human ears to catch it, she is there
 In fact of beauty. To turn then would undo,
 Would murder now, would do death brutally
 On all that's lovely in a woman's hair,
 That loosening sunlight from a branch of sky.*

*But away there already another sunlight, a circle,
 Draws the conclusion tighter. There it is.*

THE LOVE OF ORPHEUS

*Who, at the sight of this goat, of this mock giraffe,
Pledged to preserve his neck that's only a laugh
And anyhow that isn't even his,
Won't giggle when they see the poor fool tumble.*

*Yet he, at one turn of a ready head,
Could give the bad lie into good hands forever,
Unslave his sloven race from the false promise
That stiffens and darkens the final immensities.
There would be no excuse, there could be never
A man who toadied, traded his life with the dead.*

*Nevertheless as timorously as
The first of life, tobacco maize, or some
Extinct rock crystal, learned to multiply,
Take nourishment from nitrates, stock the sky
In its arrangement of the carbon atoms,
And so to change the firmament that was*

*Immense and dead about it, planets, suns,
With not a thing among them precedent
To this small newness, timorously he,
Half-hoping to turn back, turned round to see
— No, not her beauty's lasting last command —
But mildewed cerements and worm-worked skin.*

*And we will never know what would have been
Better or worse, except that here and there
A still-unworshipped god confirms his state
With simple trials or tremendous hate
Or prayers so terrible that none dare hear
Lest all their lives should never then atone.*

REQUIESCAT

*I who have done enough
Have been undone three ways,
Now call my sickness off
With these obituaries.*

*I think that I died once
But of pure innocence,
Once by the act, and once
By my quick human conscience.*

*And now these deaths are my
Imperishable pain,
So that I long to die
Again — just once again.*

POEMS

I

*The rains came early. It was autumn in.
My shallow empire folded in the grass.
The swallows flight was certain. All birds else
Sang in a splendid mimicry of dawn,
Their feathers faded by phenomenon,
Sang high as here is sorrow until dust
Brought many a silt and many an autumn pest:
Until the forest fell my boughs sang on.
And then I fell to seed, in early rain,
And all I did was done without the sun,
And did I rise I did discover bone,
And did I rise I did fall down again
My shallow empire fell to dust though I
Saw stone and strove towards shadows in the sky.*

II

*Sometimes I meet my dead and with a word
Like lightning in a scabbard of black sky
I answer and am quickened, overheard.
My dead approach lest also I should die.
It is their way sometimes to nestle down
Or crouch like robbers or be scared and rise.
It is their way to do as would have done,
Their new swift state slowed down by memories.
I do not love my dead: I do not dote,
Mourn nor obey them, but I often swear
To try by every hour remaining yet
To give them reason to forgive my share
In customary evil: and then I know
That I believe my dead just are not so.*

GEORGE BARKER

LETTER TO A DEAF POET

No, it is not that I think you so unfortunate in that affliction. (There was once an old woman, who, when she found that she could hear, wished she was deaf again because people said such banal things to one another.) Nor of course do I think you fortunate. It must be bad enough to hear, as the veritable poet does, those hyenas of self-destruction, accusation and insanity howling on all sides and at too many times: but even from such unnatural molestations you are not protected. Far from it: in the silence of the ear, you (I have witnessed this in your face and read it in your verses) apprehend all the more clearly those extra-terrestrial diatonics that transcend the senses and shatter not only glasses but lives also. What are they? It is not the silence of those uninterrupted spaces that frightens me, it is the voices that, like fire-balls, sweep out of them into our perceptions. I am speaking, you will see, of the subject of poetic inspiration. What purpose can it serve us to deny or disavow the incomprehensibility of the machinery in which we labour? I mean the machinery from which a god descends every time we do anything of which we are incapable? (Like loving one another.) Because you are a poet you will accord to all such Eleusinian Mysteries the honours that properly belong to them. You will not seek to discredit the sufferings of the unicorn simply by breaking off his horn, or of the angels by

pointing out that anyhow they have no hearts: for you are continually surrounded by the mystery of all mysteries, the silence that is so much harder to understand than any of the utterances or communications that may momentarily illuminate it. For the poet is a man who performs upon silence — the silence that preceded and will succeed all existence — exactly the same operation as the painter performs upon darkness or the architect upon space. He colonises it.

What more condign image is there than the shell in which we hear the ululations of the sea? When, in truth, what we are really hearing is the silence itself echoing in a stone? And why the sea? Is it because, when we hear the silence, we hear the silence of the Tuscaroran Deep from which, one disastrous morning, a protoplasm with intentions arose? Such speculations are not more ridiculous than, at this late hour, any and all speculations upon our own nature can most properly be. For it is clear that somehow someone has gone very wrong. At a certain point, heaven knows when, a man somewhere acceded in the notion of probability. He saw that certain things happened more often than other things, that certain events occurred with greater regularity than other events; and were therefore more likely to go on occurring. But the point, my friend, is this: he merely *envisaged* the repetition of these probabilities. I want to assert the rights and the responsibilities of all those events and occurrences he did *not* envisage at that baleful moment when human affairs surrendered to the law of averages. Outside the reasonable jurisdiction of the intelligence extends the vast territory of what we cannot know. For, if you start measuring the circumference of an optical illusion or a sin or a vision, with a foot-rule, you are not going to get the right answer. One is, after all, a conditioned observer. The important thing is to find out exactly what conditions govern us when we try to ascertain the nature of our conditions. And the answer seems to be that we are governed by the condition of a reasonable creature. Therefore all those extraordinary transcendentalities that elude the mechanics of reason because they are, in themselves, absolutely not reasonable, these

mysteries will always evade our analysis, but will always, nevertheless, exercise their operations of influence upon us, like the unborn. I give you a little fable. There was a man, a very reasonable man, who lived by a river. This river, one winter, rose and flooded his house. It did all sorts of things it should not have done. It was a criminal river, and, finally, when it drowned the man's wife, a homicidal river. However, this man, who knew how to treat mad dogs, motor-cars, escaped murderers and all things that move suddenly and dangerously, very reasonably took up his gun and went out and shot the river.

My point is this: we think that the river is dead, because, of course, sooner or later, it subsides. And an elementary acquaintance with the laws of cause and effect shows us that it subsides because it was shot. I am saying, I hope simply, something like this: that when Robespierre formally executed God, so that even now we can look up, if we feel inclined, and see that idea lying dead across the human intellect, it is still possible that we are the victims of a confusion of categories. (I do not introduce the unreasonable contingency of Resurrections.) And, what is more, we can never know whether or not this is so: we can never know whether or not we are the victims of a confusion of categories because we are not permitted by our conditioned nature to enter and inhabit all these categories, but only some. The trouble, the real trouble, is that, from the altitude of all those categories of intellectual and spiritual interpretation which we in fact inhabit, we can perceive, even though remotely and obscurely, the illusion and mirage of superior categories — illusion and mirage because we can never inhabit them. But from such uncolonisable regions as those visionary removes — and this is where I began — undecipherable communications and etymologies may sometimes reach us. The void gibbers. What ensues, for us, takes on the appearance of a revelation or an inspiration. The voice of the unknowable has spoken out of a cloud of unknowing. « This knowing that knows nothing

is so potent in its might that the prudent in their reasoning can never defeat it; for their wisdom never reaches to the understanding that understands nothing, all science transcending. » That is St. John of the Cross. I believe, for instance, that the sculptor who cut the Cerne Giant in that Dorset Hill had himself heard the first words of God to humanity: Go forth and multiply. And what had hitherto been an obscure, passionate and terrifying obligation of animal physiology became from that moment onward a ritual and liturgy of praising the human body. That huge figure with the gentle head and a torso transfixed by an iron erection, the enormous club also elevated, commemorates that moment before which sexual love had been a reflex action like sneezing and after which it became a responsible action like killing. « We become, » said Matthew Arnold as he turned into salt, « what we sing. » And we sing what the powers of the air dictate to us. But:

Did she put on his knowledge with his power?

We do not know — among so many other matters — what destiny these powers keep in reserve for us, what accumulations of apocalypse and revelation and innovation they will load upon our heads until we become, like the Atridae, walking examples of the horror and tragedy of the Elect. All that we know is that we must become this, or nothing. For it seems likely that the fate of the creature will be to perish from knowing not too much, but too little. And the piece of information it will not accept — the knowledge that it will never acknowledge — is this: that what cannot be known and arrogated to us may never the less exist and operate; may, even, determine what we are and what we will become.

And before this tremendous paradox the poet, only after the prophets and the saints, has from the beginning gone down on his knees and venerated. This is why, when Socrates asked the poets whence they got their marvellous affirmations, they replied that they did not know. The heart has its reasons, of which reason does not know. The spirit has its reasons,

of which the heart does not know. But there is no democracy within the individual, only a fiscal tyranny of the intellect, with irregular insurrections of the hand or the heart or the sympathetic nervous system. This is why so many great poems make so little sense.

If the Sun and Moon should doubt
They'd immediately go out

— this is an assertion the factual veracity of which we can never corroborate. It happens, whether we like it or not, to be out of the sphere of our pragmatism. It is a perceived axiom, not a proven axiom.

Thus I have always found the finest act of intellectual humility to be that dedication by the Greeks of an altar to the Unknown God. I think that few examples exist of a greater spiritual arrogance (this god cannot make himself known to us, but we can make ourselves known to him) and at the same time of so deliberate an intellectual humility.

And this is the paradox of the poem. For the poem affirms spiritually what it cannot possibly declare intellectually. Every poem is thus a making known of ourselves to the Unknown God, and a dedication of its altar to him. If the poem could declare in so many words all those things that it affirms in between the words and the lines, then it would not be a poem, it would be theology. I remind you that the oldest of all poems, the great Rig-veda, signifies by its title Poem of Praise. For we praise before we theologise, just as we believe before (but not necessarily until) we know.

So that your silent existence seems to me really a kind of local unknowing, which operates, as I believe, in your spiritual favour. It surrounds you with a world of which part must always remain accepted without question by you. And to what creatures are the rest of us, the 'hearing ones,' in the same position as you are to us? For this silence of yours is not silence: it is simply a degree of intimacy into which only those words of greater weight can enter. You hear love

and pride and hate and pity in your silence: you do not hear the quarrel of the sparrows. We hear the quarrel of the sparrows, but do we hear the love and the pride and the hate?

Few things seem so clear to me, now, as the constant and imperative duty of the poet to disregard the frivolities and delights in which for so long the poem has hidden its head and its responsibilities. It is no longer good enough to provide cosmetics for all the daughters of music; this served well enough in those remote days when Housman could decorate a finicky nihilism with a verb at the beginning of almost every line. For if in truth a glass of beer is better than *Paradise Lost* at explaining God's ways to us, why on earth didn't Housman drink a lot more and write even less? Because, of course, the remark is a half-truth; a mild and bitter half-truth, a specious and melancholy variant upon *in vino veritas* — but not a serious assertion. He wrote poems in a world where half-truths could claim to possess at least a little dignity. In that era of red-eyed imperialism and decayed altars, of pseudo-emperors, crypto-gods and ludicrous dynasties, at such a time even the half-truth carried half a cross. On a dying star the one-eyed maxim is king. But such excuses do not operate in the world we now so precariously inhabit. For we have been led by such half-truths into a wilderness full of hallucinations and seemingly squared circles: now only the figure with its eyes bound knows what to do. In this desert made up of grains of information the deaf can best hear the logomachy of the heart, the dumb utter the most lucid judgements, and the wild ass best find a way.

For, finally, it is not the pathos of our essential incommunicability, the silent loneliness of every individual, that seems so total; but our conviction that this isolation of every creature is really only relative. For, sometimes, we feel, if only briefly, that we can speak to each other: this is the pathos. And when George Berkeley proved the totality of this delusion, when he showed each of us that no one else existed, he demonstrated at the same time the suicide of

his own proposition. For, although he has persuaded us of the intellectual immaculacy of his conception, he has not brought it home to the common heart. And why? Because the common heart of every single creature (a term I make deliberately paradoxical) is absolutely incommunicable in its loneliness. (I think that I speak, but whom do I speak to?) The heart of every man is in Coventry and can be reached by one operation and one only, and this is the working of love. I am so convinced of this truth that I would define love simply as the equation, the only equation, which proves that there are other people in the world besides oneself. It was a noble head that defined religion as « what we do with our solitariness. »

And in this universal incommunicability of kind, this state of Lucretian isolation in which all men freely exercise their ostracism, in this silence we all share, my friend, with you, what communications reach us? Not those we most want to hear, the ejaculations of personal love, the confidences that endow us with the illusion of a momentary power, the assurances of mutual purposes — we do not hear these and suchlike things. We hear only the vast suspirations of a power continually dying and continually reborn in the interstellar spaces, the demiurge who, if not itself destroyed, will destroy us with a petulant snapping of galaxials. Against this monster of darkness who is the evil in our own nature, it is the destiny of the poem to contend. The darkness that prevailed before the annunciation of the Logos is again illuminated each time a poem is written:

I may assert Eternal Providence
And justify the ways of God to men.

But it is not that the poem offers an improvement upon the ways of God in contending with this powers of darkness; no such absurd and egregious notion moves the poet to speak. It is that the poem echoes and repeats in an infinitesimally smaller but still lucid voice, the Vox Creator, the original imperative: Let this be. Towards this imperative conception

of the poem the generative word gives that body without which the conception itself is formless and not to be. Just as we do not know what succubi emerge from the deeper regions at those invocations so frivolously uttered in drawing-rooms by theosophists.

I will call devils from the vasty deep
But will they come when I do call for them?

The privilege and price of your deafness is that you do not have to press your ear to the grave (as we do) in order to eavesdrop upon those demoniac personifications: this is so terrible a privilege and so onerous a price that no one would blame you for not listening anyhow. But the anguish of the poet and the deaf have this in common: they cannot help but hear the appalling uproar of the silence that surrounds all we do not know, the silence in which exist and evolve all those enigmas never to be elucidated, perhaps never to be perceived, and, but for such men as you, a deaf poet, never to be heard, and never, ever, to be placated.

JOHN LEHMANN

NO OTHER WORD

*Good-bye: there is no other word
That can express the world today,
And every aspect now is changed
By hints of vanishing away;*

*The public voices make believe
Reality is still as square
As what our fingers fastened on
When there was more in air than air,*

*Too deep in consequence to see
The cities where the treasures lie
Have learnt the impermanence of leaves
Under the spell of this good-bye.*

*Those ruins once that seemed so far
And had but gravestone words to say
Whisper more urgently to man
Their intimations of decay,*

*And like a lover call to him —
So close their levelled stones have come —
To leave the exile of the hour
And find among their absence home.*

*Even the animals have heard
Behind the arras of the sky
The rumour that the angels tell,
And there is knowledge in their eye:*

*I woke from dreams where I implored
The bull, the leopard and the horse
To grant forgiveness at the last
If only man would show remorse,*

*But though I spoke with eloquence
That comes to captors in despair,
I could not soften or endure
The timeless patience of their stare.*

*Good-bye: no other will meet
The alteration all has found,
Where what was spirit has become
More solid than the solid ground;*

*The knotted texture of our lives
Is thinned into the vacant sky
Under whose dark immensity
Love leans to kiss the world good-bye.*

THE WIND CARRIED AWAY

No, not that person, nor that place.

*Vision of fulfilment each in other
Like the opening bars of an unfinished tune
The wind offered, the wind carried away
Lost among blue mountains without trace.*

*Where we clambered down through the poppies
The hot, crumbly boulders the lizards' home
Where we came to the virginal bay
The immaculate welcome of an island noon;*

*No sailor's voice, no wandering peasant's eye
Not even a young goatherd's foot to deflower
The incoming ripple of light foam,
No feather of cloud in the April sky;
Only one red sail far out from land
Only the green budding fig-tree behind
The wild pomegranate, the rock-roses;
And we lay on the golden bed of the sand
And the sun fondled our shoulders
As our fingers intertwined...*

*Here to build a house at last
On the sun-lapped cliff among the boulders,
A white house looking north to sea
The red sail out there when the night's past
The fig-tree darkening leaves beside us
While the corn ripens, the cicadas sing;
Cumber of memories and sadness
Stone by stone the court-room of our lives*

THE WIND CARRIED AWAY

*Dropping into deep pools among the rocks
Translucent blue transfiguring;
Here to wake in another rhythm of gladness
Beginning again with the blue mountains above
Remembering only the inviolate bay
The ripple of foam where finger with finger locks.
The heart re-filled with love...*

No, not that person, not that place.

*Moment of impossible conjecture
Salt drying on burnt shoulders in the sand
Lost without trace.*

*Vision of fulfilment suddenly born
Like the opening bars of an unfinished tune
The wind offered, the wind carried away
Over the poppies and the ripening corn.*

DOUGLAS NEWTON

FOUNDATIONS OF OUR CITY

I

*Comfort: to snuff the heated stones of the pavement
rich with warm dust on a plump August evening,
favouring nostrils with an aroma of summer:
the truly rural savour for pavement-dwellers like us.
The road's support — a pleasure to the sole
with its rubbery give of tar over what's palpably hard
each regular pace of the stroll —
proves the security of a city as safe as houses,
while every corner reveals
the reassurance of endlessness.*

*And sunset tilts in the streets, orange as neon light,
sharpening like a lens tall lines of window and capital.*

*Beauties of town, where all that we need is found!
Our only crop, the children: ample reminder,
running and calling, under umbrellas of limes
with trunks patchy and pleasant as a decaying wall,
of populous orchards, thundering harvest.*

*(« Why do they work so hard to grow food?
There's always plenty in Lyons. »)*

*If we need water, we own sufficient seas —
our fine canals it's a dream to float upon.*

*Out in a boat, the skyline looks a ring,
palaced at least on three hundred and forty degrees*

with great stone traps which have closed on the wealth of the world.

These summer evenings one affirms one's faith.

II

*And such summer evenings are a test of faith:
the day-time acquiescence of the clerk
is apt to shift uneasily at eight. Suppose he looks
at the blank grey eyes of a girl who walks toward him,
a wide, thin smile upon her pale, broad mouth?
Will the assurance of her loose hair bewilder him?
She walks with the confidence and sway
of one who knows steps are loved.
At the barricades of the water, pausing,
if she leans to look at the fervent tides
their lights snatch, and speck, her features
as lights glissade off the precious sides of diamonds.
Linking rings run netting over her pallor
fading across her hair into the air
as he slips into them. He feels the coils
tighten without constraint along his sides
while he sinks lower by seconds.
The path of
light to her cave, deep down,
under the gondolas,
pulls and pulls like elastic;
elliptical, turns with a drastic
yank at the limbs of the diver.
Persisting deeper, he flattens
into a quavering latten
papery napkin laid down down
between shifting strata of water.
Tipping from side to side,
down he goes like a sheet*

*flipped out from fifty stories up:
and nearly bursting with sleep
darkly alights at a cave.
The whiskery fringe of its orifice,
quietly floating around,
screens a slippery, evasive crust,
breaking under a hand on the edge:
watch out for falls: the weeds
tangle and strangle, the rocks are sharp as if ground.*

*Here you are, here you are:
as you wait,
water sways you to and fro.
So for a moment only hesitate —
part a sole from stone — in you go,
bland, helpful force of water on your back
like a friendly hand.*

III

*Black as a cow's inside, the cave is,
though more precious. Fluorescent glows
of crystals creep upon the expanding eye
and grow until you see what radiates them:
on a table
a chow, with all the hairiness that art
can mould and fire in clay; a rifle
with wishes chased upon a silver plate
laid in the stock; an empty, oval
flagon of some Empire burgundy;
all arranged on an oil-cloth covered table —

and these must be the relics of a life.*

*Under your feet the smoky sand is smooth,
but if there were a footprint here
it would not be an augury of danger,*

*it would not be foretelling fear,
it would not be the imprint of a stranger,
to engender hope of some surprise and love:
you'd know its breadth and the twisting of its toes.*

*A fan of light taps on your shoulder, opens,
turns over on the air and rights itself.
The dog takes up the beam upon its china side;
across the white a picture jumps,
steadies, and starts to move.*

*Up in the theatres of the city world
the grand dramatic spectacles begin:
the curtains part, the audiences stir
content, to glories they will never own.*

*In this close passage you are all alone
and now the ignominious show begins
without the least occasion for a cheer.*

*No, there is nothing to hear but ticking sprockets
click, as the take-up flicks reeling over and over,
just too loudly for you to hear your heartbeat,
picking up endlessly the long strip of your life.*

This is a world:

*the world you with such hope and so long looked for
— am I wrong?*

*Not amiable: though a place where
one can just bear to stand
between skew currents.*

The colours here are:

*a lick of cheesy green;
yellow of bile the sick nose dribbles out; and
violet, violet, violet, corporal punishment.*

JOHN HYSLOP

THE TIDE

The old man stopped for a moment and looked down on the bay, the bay that had come up out of the sea mist that morning and been left to starboard on the last reach to the harbour. Now it lay below him like the long curve of a sword against the land, a blade hacking at the shore, continually cutting on the old broken fingers of rock that ran out from the high hill to grasp at the sand.

His feet moved downward, passing out of silence as he went onto one of the outcrops, hitting from the stone a pattern of noise that was soft but sharp against the sea's surge. He walked out to the last ledge before the rock dropped towards the water, and sat down, fitting himself into a corner. And now the noise came from all around him, no longer continuous but with different tones, rising and falling with uncertain rhythms as when a singer wavers on an unremembered word. Then through the shifting song there came the sound of words, of voices, coming it seemed from below and from the right, carried from windward, the voices of a young man and a girl talking their way through an old story.

« I cannot stay with you for long: my father's boat will be in soon and he must not know. » In her voice the hurry of so little time, and in the man's when he spoke the knowledge of a longer and a later time.

« And I cannot be long with you, either. My ship sails at high tide, in two hours. »

« There has not been much time between you and me, » the girl said, « and now you will be going away for such a long time. It is a long time, David, three years. »

« Ay, but it will be worth it when I come back. Then we will have our own house out of the money, and I will have my own boat; and there won't be the fingers of the old men gripping at our throats. »

« And what will I do all this while? It is so long to wait. Must I just work in one man's house till it is time to go and work in another man's house, and have no life to myself for these three years? No, David, it is too long, it is too long. »

« Oh, girl, you must not say that, you must never tell me that. I need you here. I need you to wait. »

Then the sound of the sea came back, harsher now and louder, touching through to the brain of the old man as he stared outwards, out beyond the rim of the breakers, staring out to lines of dark and light on the sea's surface, lines that wound and turned upon themselves, the lines of currents that ran along the coast. A bad coast this, where the waters moved without sense of pattern, with strange tides that, on one day, could bring in dark wreckage and gravel and the same night suck back the signs of its power leaving the beach, pale and bare and innocent.

His eyes had seen also, on the sea's other edge, on the straight line of its march with the sky, a thin tendril of smoke that moved imperceptibly, like the shadow of the sun or like the sun itself moving west and away, moving into the perfection of a circle, into a landless horizon.

But now, for the first time since he had come to this place, he looked downward, focussing closer, looking through the surge of foamed water that was catching at the fringe of seaweed round the foot of the rock, looking at a photograph that he had taken from his wallet. It was an old photograph, wrinkled and discoloured, with the gloss almost gone. It showed a girl against an artificial seascape. She was young

and somehow looked as if she could not fit herself, could not be fitted, into the conventional pose. She seemed about to move, to say something perhaps, or to stretch out an arm. He held the photograph against his knees, sitting motionless as before. And the voices came back.

« Ay, it is a fine idea: you would go free, but have me tied. »

« I tell you I must go away. I must get away from this place for a while. I have never been out of sight of this land or of this sea. I must be free from my father so that I can do what I want to do, not what I have been told to do; so that it is my own choice and not theirs, my own chance with my own life....

« A fine idea, and you would have me waiting here for a man that could be drowned or could, perhaps, forget to come back. There's plenty have gone away and not come back. Ay, man, and there will be plenty back before you. I tell you I will promise nothing. If you want one chance you must take the other. Don't expect me to be waiting when you come. »

« But you must promise me. Either I will have you or none will. I will not let you think on another man. »

« And how will you stop me? No, you'll find me in a different house with someone else's children. »

« That you shall not do. I would take you to sea with me. »

« And can you manage that? You, that's just a seaman. »

« Ay, girl, if this is the manner of it then we'll both go out to sea in different ways. »

The waves hit hard against the bare rock throwing up spray in a bitter rain; and above its surging there was one long harsh sobbing sound. It came just once, dying away into the race and break of the waves and the fainter hiss of their undertow.

The old man's thumbs touched on the upper edge of the photograph, the nails went white and then moved slowly away from each other; and in each hand he held a bit of stiff

paper. Again and again his fingers moved, tearing and tearing, but carefully and without sign of force, till at last he stopped, holding the small pieces in his cupped hands. Then he gave them to the wind so that they went fluttering away and down and out of his sight; and his head turned slightly as he looked after them.

But the sea was close now and flecks of spray were about his feet. He stood up and looked around the ledge. In a small crack at its edge there was a bit of the photograph. He picked it up and holding out his hand let it go again, twisting and spiralling towards the sea.

Slowly he walked back along the outcrop and climbed the grass slope. He did not look round till he reached the top of the ridge.

The horizon was a straight line, clean and unmarked and far away. Below him the line of the dark rock lay like an arrow pointing out to sea and all around the stone the waves were breaking, breaking upon the bare place where he had been. It would be high tide in half an hour.

He turned and went away.

ROBERT CONQUEST

IN THE MARSHES

Retrospect.

The sunlight filters

Through ten worse years, its categories cooling.

What cannot be reduced to order now

Is irresoluble, life. Let rage or reason take it: —

By a willow, on a narrow bank of moss

And overlooking an almost motionless creek —

The grey-green plain flecked with water

Stretches to a horizonless fading in the distance,

A few mosquitoes whine and a fish leaps —

Ilya is not really in all this, it is

Only a background to a twisting brain,

A symbol of despair like any other landscape.

He is a student. The city and the University

Are far away. The traffic down the Liberation Avenue

And by the National Theatre seems impossible.

The blanketing air contrives to soothe him a little

As he thinks of Stoyanka, lost to him

Probably for ever; partly his own fault.

He reads the French poet he is trying to translate

But the translation fades into his brain

*Or moves impossibly above the non-poetic landscape
And disappears.*

This is the best season

In the Marshes.

*In the village the wooden huts
Look almost white under a clear sun,
And the faint haze is slightly luminous around it.
Down in the canal a barge is filled with leather,
The product of the little tannery. The sun is falling.
A flash like a rainbow comes from the oil-tinged mere
In which the abandoned railway breaks and ends;
Its embankment stretches away eastwards; it sags in places
And has been entirely washed away in others,
And in one of these the derelict locomotive
Stands like a frozen mammoth in a Yakutsk glacier.*

Nevertheless, life is lived here.

*In a small but handsome house beyond the village
Lives Professor Mantev, former Minister of Trade
And now in exile. The daughter of Tomasin
The dram-shop owner dreams of love. And in a hut
By the canal Pirov the lock-keeper
Holds the secret meetings of the party branch.
There is no gendarme nearer than Shtip, five miles away;
But the village has suffered several times.*

In 1925, in the Civil War

*A platoon of legionaries burnt down half the houses
And killed three men. (It was then that the engine
Was sabotaged). In '39 for seven weeks
The inn was occupied by a punitive committee
And several inhabitants beaten up.*

(And who can see

*Or would believe that barren future which
Expropriating their own violences
Will put these enemies together
Under the coldest terror of all?)*

Ilya returns;

It is not only Stoyanka and Laforgue, but

*Everything as well. Every world-view seems
To present him with horrifying contradictions
Or baffle his conscience with inhuman clarities:
He feels pitiable, yet better than last week
When he either drank himself senseless every day
Or meditated suicide.*

II

*Professor Mantev walks slowly every morning
Along the corduroy road and then by a pathway
Into a little copse on an island of high ground
And back in time for lunch. He is doing very little,
Occasionally annotating or correcting
A chapter in his book on Nogay place-names.
He reads the papers and is sometimes angry
At the government's clear treachery and meanness, but
He seldom really thinks of returning. He has lost ambition.
Perhaps he is getting old.*

Two days ago

*There was an accident in the lock, a man fell
Between a barge and the lock-side, was crushed to death,
Brown blood floating on the scummy water.
This happens occasionally.*

*Mantev was not really
Affected by it. In theory he is a humanist,
But in the marshes a curious lethargy of feeling
Has taken him. He looks at the landscape,
Affected rather oddly, feeling its horizons
As flat, receding agencies of life.
And the recession draws him on into a spirit's mere.*

III

*Maria Tomasinova sits in her father's inn,
On a wooden stool in front of the enormous stove*

*Which will not be lit till late October.
She thinks of Ilya and thinks it love.
And perhaps it is, or will be. In her heart
At any rate it moves more piercingly
Than many greater passions.*

*In this country
The primary education is extremely good,
And the peasants are politically informed
And read the national poets.*

*But still,
Ilya has the glamour of a higher culture
For a girl who has been through progymnasium. He is not
Particularly handsome, but has a distant look
And curious violence in his eyes and brow.
She is not thinking of the sexual act,
Which is uncommon in the countryside
Among the unmarried. But her body moves
In a fresher and more pleasing way.*

*The sun
Strikes through the open door and makes the dust
Into a fog of light. She sighs;
And a light breeze ruffles the water of the marshes
And bends the high grass on the little islands
On which are browsing the small local cattle;
Pirov is oiling the lock-machinery and whistling.
And far down the dusty road some carts are toiling
Towards Szopol, with fish.*

IV

*The Marshes have their own allure. The yielding air,
The cowmen's horns, the fish flashing,
And all the smoothness of the heavy summer
To some are more appealing than the snowbound peaks
Or the rolling garden country of the Central Province.
A grebe cries.*

Yes, we all know

*That history holds the Marshes in its iron grip
 Like every other region, that next year will see
 The alliance with Germany and the small beginnings
 Of the partisan movement: in all the area
 A few groups of half a dozen men
 Occasionally shooting up a gendarmes' post
 Or cutting the telegraph wires; and a rule of torture
 Set up against them. Pirov beaten to death
 In the reception cell at Szopol jail;
 Ilya a conscript, invalided out
 With an incurable leg; Maria surviving;
 The short October fighting in the Marshes,
 A threshing blindness of noise and lightning,
 A smell of cordite mixing with the swamp smell,
 And spreading areas of black upon the water;
 And then the coup d'état: everything different;
 Professor Mantev recalled to the capital
 To take part in the government of the National Front,
 And a yet more bitter cycle of betrayals...
 And gradually all fading into their other lives,
 With these Marshes and this summer forgotten.*

— None of threads work out.

*We cannot pursue them down the twisting future
 Nor form a close-knit tragic destiny,
 Or even some fulfilment for the promised local lyrics
 Of Ilya or Maria. No, it all dissolves.*

Yet

*Although this area has no especial beauty
 And the season is pleasant but not unusual,
 It is unique. These moments and these people
 Meet in an absolutely new and unforgettable
 Fusion. For this time and place
 Like any other, every life must bear
 Always its vague regrets, and sometimes piercingly
 Pangs of nostalgia
 For what can never be repeated in them.*

JAMES RUSSELL GRANT

A CLOUD OF GHOSTS

*This city is haunted by young men without ambition,
Who don't seem to care about girls or motor-cars,
Or holding any sort of position.*

There is a timeless air about them:

*Whether in hotel bars,
Knocking back Scotch with a serious air,
Saying the world is as well without them;
Or, in the afternoon, at coffee,
Earthing dreams we would not dare,
For fear of shock, attempt,
They stir round their mysterious coffee
The giant current of the soul,
And hold themselves in all exempt,
Rather than one should say aloof,
From common things. Yet they pay toll,
If not in quantity of time, to weight;
As though each leaden hour must own its proof,
— Futility, or action, or learning, —
And leave that marker on the sea of fate,
Filed for future reference.*

*Theirs is nameless yearning.
A pause in search of commas
To end the awful inference
Of silence. A shy dream,
Summoning some long-forgotten promise
To be true. Only this,*

*Grafted across a moonbeam
 In a deserted street
 In the metropolis,
 Or hung across the evening sun
 Before it can retreat
 Through the West End park;
 And the fat dragon of the lonely one
 That will slide away
 Into the sliding dark,
 And leave the weary plaintiff there to mourn.*

*Yesterday,
 A hint of paradise in nameless places;
 Or glimpsing peace in some sequestered bourne;
 While tomorrow
 Eats into the same faces
 With the same mixture of sullen joy
 And treasured sorrow.*

*It is surely many times that they have vowed,
 I will be my father's son. I will employ
 Reason. I will accept the surfaces
 I'm told I touch, and be a doctor. Do him proud.
 Wipe the skies clean, and study God;
 Or, without any dilatory prefaces,
 Build my business like a man, and charge Her
 With my eternity. — And then they'll nod,
 And smile wisely on each other. —
 Here's enough to tip the verger;
 They'll say. You won't make more than that.
 Where were we before you interrupted, brother?
 — Eh?*

What were we looking at?

*So, by suffering a flame
 To burn enamel off clay,
 They prise the core of things apart,
 And find a same
 Substantive, a same gasp
 That the most inner heart*

*In the electric storm of birth
Must importunately clasp,
And with bright forms and phantom shapes
People earth.*

*They never know enough.
They keep on making passes through the drapes,
Till one day, drawing blood,
They find a different stuff,
Reached at the very point of all their wonder.
Then they may daub their dribbling wounds with mud,
And seal the flame in place with broken ice,
And stamp the mist of memory with thunder.*

*Over those unrepenting ranks
No banner flies, and no device
Tells what they would do.
No one comes to offer thanks
For helping out humanity
When life's worn through.*

*I am haunted by a vision of their lonely urge to truth,
Their total disregard for human vanity.
Why is it all the things we spend a lifetime doing
Seem all at once unlovely and uncouth?
— We live in hope that we do greater things
Than we shall ever know. Old time is brewing
Our black draught of death. How summers go!
How seventy we are before it springs!
... And a haven hard to come by.*

*They are the unsung overflow
Who void our gambling proposition,
Denounce the dead-line 'Live, or die!',
And the exclamation marks of rain
In the painted clouds of false ambition.
Through the vacuum where they go,
Where they can never go again,
A ghost cloud shivers in the empty air,
Just like a rainbow on the snow,
Staining our eyes with stuff that isn't there.*

MICHAEL SAYERS

THE TRIUMPH OF RATIONALISM

Tomas and I would steer clear of that place as a rule, but this day hunting a weasel brought us on top of the hill before we knew where we were, and then Tomas noticed the new small heap of stones below the big pile of the Cairn, and so I had to go up to it and give it a shove with my boot, which dislodged the rock on top and opened the hole. That's how I caught the shine of it.

« What is it? » said Tomas.

I examined it as well as I could, without touching it, pulling more stones away. Finally, I said:

« I'll tell you what it is. It's a bomb! »

« A bomb? »

« Aye, » I said. « A bloody bomb! »

I raised myself and stood beside him and we both stared down at the square shiny tin box we'd found at the foot of the Cairn on the hill. The box had been poorly or hastily hidden, perhaps by night, under the stones. There was a slit in the top of it, and a short inch of white fuse spunk poked out.

« But who could be hiding a bomb in this place? » said Tomas. « And why? »

That was a question, indeed, for it was a desolate lonely place there by the Cairn on the hill. Farmers always made a wide arc whenever they had to pass it. They claimed the

old stones had been piled there a thousand years past to keep down the savage and restless spirits of the ancient pagan dead, and to prevent them breaking back into daylight and doing harm to the living. They said fairies came out after twilight and made weird things happen. The whole countryside for miles around was riddled with rumours and rotted with superstitions about the Cairn, and that's a fact. But who, as Tomas said, would be hiding a bomb in this place, and why?

« Shall I try and lift it? » I said, after we'd scratched our heads and puzzled our minds over our find without arriving at any conclusions.

« Is it likely to go off maybe? » said Tomas cautiously.

« I doubt that it would. But, then, on the other hand it might. If you dropped it, it might go off! »

« And why would I drop it, man? »

Tomas is a slow man, and I'm quick, and I can't abide waiting. I bent down and took the box in my hands and lifted it up. It was the kind of tin box they put biscuits in.

« Is it heavy? » said Tomas.

« Not what you'd call heavy and not what you'd call light. It's middling weight. Shall I take off the lid? »

« Will it come off? »

« Here, give me a hand while I try. »

« Now, wait, hold on! » Tomas backed away. « Suppose there's one of them timers inside or an automatic release or something on that order, and it goes off when you open the lid? »

« Ah, come on and give us a hand and don't be imagining things! » I was growing impatient with Tomas and his procrastinating ways. « Why would there be an automatic release inside the tin if there's a fuse outside that has to be lighted to make it go off? Come on, hold the box, and let me get the lid off! »

So he held the box, and I started to pull off the lid. It wouldn't come off. It was soldered on, not a very neat job, but sound enough to hold the lid so I couldn't budge it.

« Here, » said Tomas suddenly, handing it back to me, « take it away from me, I don't want to be holding it! »

I didn't relish holding it either, so we put it down carefully in the hole where we'd found it and piled the stones over it again, taking care not to jolt it, and to be sure we'd know where it was we put a pointed red stone sticking up out of the heap as a marker.

We started down the hill, wondering who we should tell about our strange discovery.

« It hasn't been lying there long, » I said, as we trudged homewards over the fields, « or I'd have said it was an old IRA cache w a s left forgotten since the times of the Trouble. »

« How do you know it isn't an IRA cache? » said Tomas.

« If it is, it's something new. There's no rust on the tin and the fuse cord is brand-new. Why would the IRA suddenly come in here with a bomb? Sure, there's nothing to blow up around here, is there? »

« We halted and looked back and around at the green and grey vista of bare fields and wan sky as far as you could see. The fields travelled uphill, rippled with grassy mounds, to where the Cairn rose from its grey litter of stones, itself only a higher greyer pile, gleaming now with the golden afternoon sun on it, and the horizon clouds beyond, low and rosy. Nothing else, not even a sheep or a rabbit. So we walked on till we came to the road and met Peader Mahan coming by with his cart and he gave us a lift into the village.

The puzzle that stayed with us was who we should talk to about what we'd found. Tomas said we should go to the Garda, but it's a tradition in my family, which I uphold, never to bring in the policemen when it's possible to keep them out.

Then Tomas said we should tell Father Delanhey, and this began an argument, for Tomas is a religious man, and though my family has never opposed the clergy in the right-ful fulfilment of their duties, and never will, still, as my old

man used to say, barring births, marryings and deathbeds, why bring in the clergy?

« Well, we've got to do something, » said Tomas. « We can't leave that bloody bomb up there without taking some steps, can we? Suppose it goes off? »

« Ah, how in blazes can it go off unless someone lights the fuse of it? Have sense, man! » I was beginning to be fed up with Doubting Tomas and his waits and cautions. He never would stand up to anything for longer than you'd wink. « Besides, » I said, « even if it did go off what harm could it do anyone up there in that lonely place? »

« But supposing it's meant for somewhere else? Supposing it's only being hidden up there for the meanwhile? » said Tomas. « We ought to be doing something about it. »

« That's exactly what I'm trying to decide upon, » I told him, « except you keep interrupting! »

We were having this argumentative discussion for the hundredth time sitting on the bridge-wall past Mahan's yard. It was a warm evening, darkening to night, and we were smoking and kicking our heels, wondering what to do, when who should come by but Daniel MacAlister with his sack on his back.

« What's happening, boys? » says he.

He always greeted us like that. As if anything ever could be happening in a place like ours except maybe someone went crazy or someone came back from far-away parts or someone fell down and broke his neck.

« What's happening, boys? »

He had a high squeaky voice like a woman, and he always waved his hand when he talked, like an actor on the stage, and he wore the battered remnant of a wide-brimmed black velour hat on the back of his big bony head like a French artist from Paris, and he carried his old sack on his back with his total personal possessions stuffed into the end of it like the picture of a pilgrim bound off to see the Pope in Rome in the olden times. He was a queer character, Danny MacAlister. They say he once went for to be a priest at May-

nooth, but somehow he got spoiled for the cloth, and afterwards during the Trouble he was a gunman and took a wound in the skull left him queer in the brain over since. He'd scare people sometimes with the glitter in his little blue eyes and the way he'd suddenly burst into speeches which made no sense to anyone about Science and Reason and the Future History of Mankind. No one knew how he lived or ate or where he slept. He'd wander into the sunlight and out from time to time with his sack on his back and a ragged bit of a book in his hand, muttering in his beard about the great days that would be coming a thousand years from now, after we'd all be dead. Everyone else in the village was mad about the Past, but Danny MacAlister was mad about the Future.

« The bold Danny, » said Tomas, greeting him as he came up that evening. « Nothing is happening, if it's all the same to your worship! »

« Aha! » said Danny MacAlister, waving his skinny hand in the air. « That's what you think, young fellow! But maybe there's more going on than meets your eye! »

« As for instance what? »

« Things, » said Danny with a strange look, cutting himself short.

And for some reason, as he said that, the image of the tin box with the white fuse in it hidden in the Cairn on the hill started into my mind, and I shivered in the darkening evening, I couldn't tell why.

« Tell me more, Danny, » said I.

And didn't Danny look over his shoulder and, coming closer to us, he poked his nose into our middles.

« Did you ever hear of a bucko named Paine? Thomas Paine Esquire of the U.S.A.? »

« I did not. » Nor Tomas either: he shook his head.

« What about him? »

« What about him? » said Danny, waving his hand, so it caught Tomas under his nose, and almost knocked him flat backwards off the bridge-wall into the black stream

below. « What about him? I'll tell you what about him! The Rights of Man and the Defense of Reason! You never heard about that, did you? No, you didn't! And why? Because you weren't let! You weren't let! » he said again in a terrible tone of fury and scorn. But then he straightened up and stepped back and looked at us as if he was sizing us up. « What age have yous? Are yous over or under the age of adult comprehension? »

« I'm seventeen and Tomas here is a year older. »

« So! » He came in close again, and dropped his voice into a whisper. « Then yous are old enough to know! Now, answer me in one hard word — are yous with me or against me? »

« O, with you, with you to the death, Danny, » said I quickly to quieten him, for I could see Tomas pale as a pigeonsplash beside me, and I wasn't feeling any too comfortable myself, sensing more in his wild words than their meaning.

« Good then! » And he swung his sack on his back. « I'll be counting you in for the Future! »

And with that didn't he take himself off, but instead of heading down the road into the village, he cut off across the fields and up towards the hill. We could see his tall bent figure heading into the evening mist. He was holding on to his black hat, his long brown coat-tails rising darkly around him, and his old sack bobbing up and down on his back.

« What's ailing him tonight? » said Tomas fearfully.

« I don't know. But do you see where's he heading? »

« Where? »

« For the Cairn. »

« For God's sake, » said Tomas, « you don't imagine it's his bomb? »

I jumped down off the wall.

« Here, where are you going? »

« After him! »

« Hold on, » said Tomas, « I'm a bit afraid. »
But all the same he came with me.

The mist was coming down damply and the moon had risen over the hill by the time we reached the last ditch in the field where it was convenient for us to skulk down lest we'd be seen. From here we had a clear view of the Cairn. The sky was still bluish with the evening beyond, but the brightening moon on our right over the elder-trees seemed to be moving towards it over a mound of massy cloud. We could just about make out the bent long figure of Danny flitting along at the foot of the piled stones. Then he was bending down and flinging the stones back behind him.

Thomas gripped my arm.

« He's looking for the bomb! »

We must have put it back in a slightly different place, for it seemed by Danny's searching that he couldn't find it. But then he stopped upsetting the stones and suddenly there was a little yellow flare of a match.

« He's going to set light to it! » said Tomas in a panic. « He's going to blow the bloody thing up! I'm getting out of here! »

And he leaped up in his fright, but I held on to him, and pulled him back, for I could see or guess that what Danny was doing over there was examining the bomb to see if it had been interfered with, and not lighting the fuse.

« Wait, » I told Tomas.

« What are you going to do? »

« I'm going to speak to him! » And suiting the word I climbed out of the ditch and headed over the grass towards the Cairn. Tomas climbed up and after me.

Danny didn't hear us coming till we were almost upon him, but then he saw us and began heaping up the stones to cover the bomb. We came right up to him. He was kneeling on the ground, his old sack beside him, heaping the stones over the tin box with his long shaky hands.

« What are you doing here, Daniel MacAlister? » I said sternly, speaking like a policeman.

« O, is it yourself? » said Danny, gasping. « You gave me a terrible startle, so yous did, creeping up on me like that! »

« We know what you've got hidden there under them stones, » said Tomas suddenly.

Danny gaped at him a minute. Then he took off his black hat, scratched his head, put his hat back on his head, and looked up slyly at us. He threw the stones aside and uncovered the tin box. He held it in his lap and patted it.

« Do you know what this is? »

« We suspect it's a bomb. »

« Aye, » he said. « It is that. »

« Where did you get it? » said Tomas.

« I made it, » he said. « And it's a bloody powerful bomb, let me tell you that. Do you know what's inside it? »

« What? »

« This tin box here, » said Danny, « is packed full of gelignite. O, it'll raise a terrible roar of destruction when it goes off, I tell you! »

« Where did you ever get hold of gelignite? » said Tomas suspiciously.

« Ah, that's an old story! » said Danny. « Sit down here beside me and I'll tell you, for I'm getting a crick in the neck squinting up at yous! »

We hesitated at that, put off by his strange cool manner and the tin box in his lap. But then I sat down, and Tomas followed. We waited to hear what he'd say.

« I've had the knowledge of these matters, and the means, too, a long while at my fingertips, » Danny said calmly. « You wouldn't know it, of course, but in the days when your mam-mies' milk was still dribbling from your mouths, Daniel MacAlister was fighting, Mauser in one hand and Mills bomb in the other, for the liberty and independence of this nation! »

« The IRA? » I said.

« Aye, » said Danny dreamily.

« What did I tell you? » said Tomas. « It's an IRA job! »

« IRA job, my eye! » said Danny. « Sure, that old gang is gone with the wind. Where are they now, I ask you? And what did they ever accomplish, for all their nationalist blather and murder, but change the hue of the rag that flies over the Dublin Customs House? That's all they ever did! And why? » His voice grew wild, and angry, and screechy again. « Because they shot at individuals and let the ideas of tyranny live! »

« What ideas, for instance? » I said, drawing him out to the end.

He cocked his wicked blue eye at me and the moon jumped over the clouds making it glitter in a terrible way and the box in his lap suddenly shone like a lamp.

« I'll tell you, » he said, « and listen carefully to me now and remember what you hear. The Idea of Superstition to begin with. The Idea of Religion to follow. And after that the Idea of Money. And Business. And the Nation. And Economic Class. And all the other ideas that crush the living heart out of a man's existence and beggars him who's born a prince of nature! »

He stood up abruptly, so Tomas and I twitched with fright, and looking down at us weirdly from under the great black brim of his hat he waved his long hand and began shouting.

« Take you two young buckos! Aren't you young? Aren't you in the prime of your youth and the glory of your being? Aren't your lungs sound and your vision clear and your genitals taut and ready? Twenty-one and twenty-three! And will you look at yourselves! With your hangdog mouths and your dimmed wits and your torn trousers and your hobnail boots, condemned to days of idleness and empty hands by the tyranny of ideas that nail you as surely as Roman nails nailed Christ, who was no God but a Rationalist with a sword of destruction in his hand! And why don't you rebel? Because you can't! And why can't you? Because

yous don't know what yous ought to know! And why don't yous? Because yous aren't let! »

His voice was screaming at us by now, and I could feel Tomas edging away along the stones to make a break and a run out of the range of his madness. But Danny swooped down, almost on top of him, and grabbed the tin bomb. He held it up with a great sweep of his arms so it caught the bright moonlight and seemed to blaze with white fire.

« Here's my shiny hammer ready to strike the liberating blow! » he cried out, waving the bomb.

« What's he going to do? » whispered Tomas, shaken with his fright.

Danny put down the bomb and, pulling a crumpled paper pamphlet out of his coat pocket, he bent down and shook it under our noses.

« Look what is says here! It's published by the Rationalist Association and written by a great man, whoever he is, by the name of Ingersoll! Hear what he says! » He held the pamphlet close to his eyes and began reading aloud. « *It's the sacred duty of every Rationalist to explode the Tyranny of Superstition wherever and whenever he finds it!* » He stuffed the pamphlet back in his pocket.

« That's the program! » he said.

« Explode supersition? » said I. « How? »

« First things first, » said Danny, « Step by step. First, blow up the old pagan idols that are still cluttering up the modern mind, and terrorising it, and handing it over to still further superstitions. First, this damned Cairn! »

« The Cairn? » I said, amazed.

« The root of it all, » said Danny. « But that's only a start. Next, the Celtic Crosses. Then the Churches. Then the Banks. Then the Dail, the Houses of Parliament, Leinster House, Buckingham Palace, the White House, the Russian Kremlin → the whole bloody shebang! »

« Blow them up? » said Tomas, astonished. « What for? »

« The only rational reason for any destroying, » said Danny. « To wipe the ground clear for the Future! »

« But, sure, there's nothing reasonable in that! » I exclaimed.

Danny stared at me, suddenly quiet.

« Sure, a lonely man can't be reasonable, » he said softly, staring at me with a queer fixed look. « It'd take all of yous together to be that.... But I'll do what I must do, » he muttered, « and others after me will do better! »

And he slowly shook his long head under the big black hat.

But then he ceased his muttering and looked sharply at us.

« Now yous two better scuttle for cover and keep away from me after this night. »

He picked up the bomb and began settling it back in the hole among the stones under the Cairn.

« Go on, now, quickly! »

He took a box of matches from under his coat and began to open it.

Tomas caught hold of me.

« He's going to light it! »

« I am, » said Danny. « So hurry, now. The fuse is short, and I have to be hasty with it. »

Tomas scrambled to his feet.

« I'm getting! »

« Wait, » I told him.

Danny was kneeling down, paying no heed to us, and burying the bomb under the stones, leaving a little space for his hand to put in the lighted match to set off the fuse. There was the scrape and flare of a match.

« O, begod, » yelped Tomas. « I'm going! »

And before I could stop him didn't he turn and bolt into the night.

« You better run for it, too, » said Danny, kneeling over the stones. The first match had gone out and now he was taking another.

« Wait, Danny, » I said, pleading with him and trying to think what to tell him to put the mad thought out of his head.

« I've waited long enough, » said he. « We've all waited and waited, and now it's time for someone to act. Get going, now, I'm lighting the fuse. »

And he lit the second match, cupping it in his fists, and bent over the stones. He drew away and shook out the matchlight. I saw the spark of the burning spunk among the dark stones. I even thought I could smell it burning. And that drove me frantic.

« In the name of God, Danny, » I said, « do you know what you're doing? »

« Go on, now, » he said, piling stones over the burning bomb. And then he stood up. He took up his sack and turned swiftly to me. « It's a short fuse, I'm telling you! »

« Stop it, » I said.

« Go on, now! »

« No, » I said, and I made a dash for the piled stones, clutching at them, and flinging them aside, searching for the damn bomb hidden in there with the lighted fuse on it burning down every second.

« You Judas! » yelled Danny. « You said you were with me to the death! Come away from there, I tell you! »

But I kept dragging the stones and I saw the glow of the fuse and reached out to quench it, when Danny ran at me, tearing at my head and shoulders, and then he had me by the hair, and I fell over backwards. I got up in a rage, the tears in my eyes so I could hardly see, and he came at me again, swinging his sack in my face, and then he gave me a great push in the chest and I staggered back and tripped, and went down again with a crash and a jolt on the full of my back.

« Have you doused it on me? » shrieked Danny.

I was up on my elbow and saw him scrambling over the stones, looking for the fuse which we both thought at that moment I'd quenched and put out. He was muttering

and growling, searching wildly for the bomb among the stones, and I was raising myself, and I think I yelled at him again, when suddenly the earth gave a heave and there a flash and a roar. I saw Danny's arms lift in the white light like black wings, and stones in the air, and then one must have hit me for the whole light went out, and I was down like a deadman.

When I came to again I felt sick and dizzy in the head, where one of the flying stones must have clumped me, and Tomas was there beside me, and Father Delanhey bending over me, and O'Carroll the Garda standing with his back to me looking at the Cairn. The moon was up high and serene and everything was clear as noonday.

« Are you all right now? » said Father Delanhey.

I said I was, but I was feeling far from well.

« It's a mercy of God you aren't gone! »

I got up and the dizziness dwindled.

« You should have come to me, » I heard the priest saying. « I'd my eye on him for a long time, and his dangerous blather about the Future and Reason. He was a mad bad man, may God forgive him! »

O'Carroll came up to me and said, « You should have reported this sooner! »

« He's the face blown off him, » said O'Carroll, jerking his thumb across to the Cairn which stood, it seemed to me, as it always had, a grey pile of stones in the bright moonlight. But now there was a hole in the ground at its base and the corpse of Danny MacAlister face down and half buried in piled stones, as if another and smaller Cairn had been heaped over him to keep him down to everlasting.

« That's the end of him and his Reason! » said Father Delanhey, bitterly.

I stepped away from him, not taking his proffered hand which he held out to steady me, and I gazed at the sight in the stones.

« Sure, a lonely man can't be reasonable, » I said softly, to myself, and striving to understand the pain and the truth I felt in those words.

KAY CICELLIS

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

STORYTELLER

I am looking at a picture. It is the picture of a small island port. The time is morning. In the foreground, the sea. Immediately behind it, the quay, lined with lampposts. Behind the quay, there is a square; in the middle of the square, the white statue of a bishop, hands outstretched in blessing. On the right, a large, low building with roomy arcades: the fish market. On the left, a row of small shops; outside one of the shops, I can just distinguish a few chairs and tables. So this is a café; people are sitting and standing there. Looking more closely, I see a hand half-raised, beckoning to the waiter; I see the waiter's apron, slightly bulging, caught in the distortion of the silent wind that was blowing when the picture was taken. And further on, a foot flung forward: a man walking away. All fixed, clear, still; so still that these half-gestures do not seem interrupted, but timelessly continued.

The background is made up of treetops, showing that there is another, inner square behind. Then there are roofs; mostly sloping, tiled, huddling untidily, growing smaller and smaller in the distance. There the town ends. The back of the picture is only sky. There are no mountains, no visible landscape. The town stands in the way.

(MUSIC)

STORYTELLER

If my picture were larger, I would be able to see the houses better; I would see such things as gardens, doors, windows: the knocker on a door, the curtains inside a window. I might even be able to see

through the window — through the window of the large house on the left of the inner square, near a tall church. And then I would come upon a woman — a middle-aged woman in a thin, summer dressing-gown, standing in the middle of a room with a bunch of keys in her hands.

I know this woman. She is a widow. Her name is Elvira Gorgorini. She, too, is perfectly still-fixed, like the beckoning hand, like the waiter's bulging apron; like the silent wind that blew at no particular moment.

The picture is clear, and perfectly still. But suddenly a date — the 9th of August, 1953 — a date, with a click, puts the entire picture into motion. And the time is no longer morning — any morning; but *this* morning.

(MUSIC)

ELVIRA GORGORINI

Standing in the middle of her bedroom in her house in Lixouri, Mrs. Gorgorini fumbled angrily with her keys. They were heavy, unwieldy keys, slightly rusted. One of them was the key to the cellar, where Mrs. Gorgorini kept her demijohns of wine, her small vinegar barrels, her large oil casks. But she could not find the key. She had two sons, one a grown boy, the other a child still; yet neither of them had thought of writing out small tabs for her keys.

Mrs. Gorgorini walked out briskly into the hall, wrapping her kimono tightly about her body, which showed she meant to be particularly active from now on. She called the servants. They did not come: they had not heard her. They were busy talking over the earthquake that had occurred early that morning. Mrs. Gorgorini was angry; what business had they to be talking about the earthquake? She had been far more frightened than anybody else, even though it was only an ordinary earthquake, such as they often had. She had cried aloud — Saint Gerasimos, Saint Spyridon, Saint Dionysios — but now that it was over, she forgot about it and concentrated on the work to be done.

Mrs. Gorgorini walked irritably into the big drawing-room, which she preferred to call the ball-room. There she kept the rare and wonderful possessions gathered by the noble ancestors of her dead husband. Mrs. Gorgorini never referred to her husband by name now; she used the term — the Unfortunate One.

On a bulky chest of drawers lay a pair of dusty black paper wings, spotted with red. They were part of a fancy dress worn by Mrs. Gorgorini's younger son on Carnival Sunday last March. She remembered

how the little boy had darted around the crowded square — a minute black and red Mephistopheles — frightening the women, causing the stern Headmaster to smile, making her proud. There had been no other costume like it; it could not have been finer, even if she had copied it from a foreign magazine.

Mrs. Gorgorini left the ball-room, throwing as usual a serious, loving glance at the Sèvres set locked away in the glass closet. It was nearly lunch-time. The kitchen was filling up with a variety of people; peasants from her country estate, the servants' relations, people who had come to ask a favour, or go on some errand for the lady of the house.

KITSO BATTISTATO

Among them was Kitso Battistato, Mrs. Gorgorini's neighbour in the country. He drove villagers to town every day in his new Willys station wagon, against a fare of 5,000 drachmae.

Mrs. Gorgorini brought a jar of salt herrings in oil for the visitors to have with their wine; then she walked over to Kitso. She reminded him that he must fetch her tomorrow evening and drive her to her country-house, with her family and luggage. This was her annual summer visit, to escape the heat and attend to the grape harvest. Then they talked of other things. It was now five hours since the town of Ithaca — many miles away — had been destroyed by the earthquake. But Mrs. Gorgorini and Kitso did not know this; the earthquake was already out of their minds, and not mentioned once in their conversation.

FATHER RUSSELLO

Some people in Lixouri did not forget so quickly. Father Russello was one of them. He was worried; he felt responsible. He was a new priest, young and red-haired, with blue eyes; formerly a carpenter, now a repairer of watches as well as a priest. He looked after his church of St. Gerasimos like a good housewife. The earthquake which destroyed Ithaca happened while he was locking up the church after the morning service. While the stone step on which he stood quivered beneath him, he thought hurriedly, « Thank God, it's only a small one. » At the same time his ear was intent on catching the sound of a fall or a crash inside the church. But he heard nothing. He hesitated for another moment, and then with a sudden determination he re-entered

the church and walked up to a silver tabernacle near the altar. He took it up in his strong arms and carried it into the aisle at one side of the church. He placed it with great care beneath the jutting balcony which was used by the women. The balcony would protect the ikon in the tabernacle if there was another earthquake. The ikon of St. Gerasimos was quite new, it had no great value, but Father Russello admired it greatly, for the gold paint in the background was new and sparkling, dazzling the eye like the morning sun.

Father Russello left the church, feeling considerably relieved. As he walked back home in the noon heat, sweating under his long black robes, he decided that he would hold a service of invocation in the evening for the avoidance of further earthquakes.

ELVIRA GORGORINI

The service began at seven. Mrs. Gorgorini decided to attend it with her younger son. She was not a religious fanatic like Siora Philarete, her neighbour in Ixouri, who went to church three times a day and fasted eight months in the year. Mrs. Gorgorini was sensibly religious, and frankly enjoyed a service now and then.

There were few people in the church, the reason being that it was Sunday evening, a time of freedom and amusement. During the service Mrs. Gorgorini occupied her mind with an absorbing question. What on earth were those large dark stains on the floor? How could Father Russello, a tidy, careful man, and a good priest, allow such a thing to happen in his church?

After the service, Mrs. Gorgorini asked the priest about the stains. He explained that the earthquake that had struck Ithaca had upset the silver oil-lamps and spilt some of the oil on the floor. He had scrubbed at it all afternoon, but the oil was thick and dark, and the stains would not go.

« Try sprinkling some ash on them, » suggested Mrs. Gorgorini, but she said this absent-mindedly. She was bewildered: had the earthquake been as bad as that, then?

NAPOLÉON BOURDOUVANO

At the café down in the square by the sea, Napoleon Bourdouvano, the stevedore, seemed to be the chief source of information on the disaster that had struck Ithaca.

Napoleon Bourdouvano was big and sturdy, and quite young, with

a child's face. He was famous for his eating capacity and his jokes. He was very much liked by everybody in Lixouri, including the gentry. He had free admission to all the big houses, and often had a cup of coffee with one of the notables at the Municipality café. This was mainly because he had excellent manners in their company. He could switch over in an instant from his loud dockyard coarseness to an attitude of exquisite, very nearly chivalrous respect.

On that Sunday evening, Napoleon was in one of his louder moods. He sprawled across three chairs; one for his body, one for his feet, one for his right elbow. With the help of his stout stick, he gave vivid, though imaginary descriptions of the damage in Ithaca. All the houses had fallen, he said, cutting the air horizontally with his stick. A huge wave had risen from the sea and flooded the water front. The boats in the harbour had parted their cables. Great cracks had appeared in the ground. His story was so horrifying that several people shrugged and said he was making it up, because he had the devil in him to-day, as it was Sunday and a time of freedom and amusement.

MARINO DEBONERA

Napoleon Bourdouvano was not the only man who talked about Ithaca that night. Marino Debonera protested that he knew far more about the disaster than Napoleon, owing to his position. He was a customs official, and had met the captain of the first Ithacan caique to arrive in Lixouri after the earthquake. He had heard from this man that the Minister of Welfare was expected in Ithaca tomorrow, that the exact number of houses destroyed was 482, that the wounded amounted to fifty. Three people had been killed.

RUBINA BONANOU

Marino Debonera was interrupted by the excited chatter of Rubina Bonanou, a heavy, brown-faced woman of peasant stock who lived in Lixouri. She could not take any interest in all this talk about Ithaca. Never mind about Ithaca — *she* had fresh news of the earthquake, real news, news of here.

Rubina Bonanou had a boy of twelve, who worked as an apprentice on a motor-launch. The boat belonged to Rubina's nephew, Paviello the Parisian — so called because of thirty years spent in France as a taxi driver. She had met her son on the pier, just back from a sea trip to the beautiful beach at Platy-Yalo with a party of Athenian

tourists. As they were nearing the beach, the boat skipped once, twice, then bumped hard against the water like a car against a large stone. The entire boat vibrated. Paviello flew into a rage. He shouted at Rubina's boy, and slapped him across the face. He accused him of fiddling with the engines, of ruining the boat. The boy had grown red, and very nearly cried. Then unexpectedly there came a triumph for him, and also wonder. On the shore they found a number of people gathered around and some boulders which had just rolled down the slope.

They said this was the earthquake's going. « What earthquake? » asked Paviello sharply. « Didn't you feel it? » they said. « Five minutes ago. Quite a good one too. »

MARINO DEBONERA

Marino Debonera was annoyed. She did not understand. What had happened here was unimportant, Cephalonia had known tremendous earthquakes in the past — in 1867, in 1767, in 1693, even as far back as 938. But this time Ithaca was the epicentre of the tremors; Cephalonia was outside it. Besides, the fact that the Minister of Welfare would visit Ithaca next day was sufficient proof that the trouble was centred there.

ELVIRA GORGORINI

Sitting in the café, Mrs. Gorgorini listened unhappily to the stories and the rumours. These people, they did not know about such things, they did not understand, in the first place, what it would mean to lose one's fine house, one's belongings. They had nothing to lose. It was natural that they should treat it as a joke. But she could assure them it would be no joke at all to see, for instance, a 300-year-old house crumble to dust with its rare Venetian furniture and complete Sèvres set.

Her thoughts went back to the Unfortunate One. She accused him gently; how had he found the heart to die, leaving her alone with two children in a difficult life?

She hurried home, feeling strangely restless. It was too late to begin packing for the trip to the country-house, so she found relief in ordering the servants to carry the bedding and mattresses from the bedrooms into the front hall. « If there is another earthquake, at least we shall

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

be near the door.» Her elder son laughed at her fears; but in the end everybody obeyed her instructions willingly enough.

Mrs. Gorgorini did not sleep well that night. She woke up at the slightest noise.

(MUSIC)

STORYTELLER

Monday morning dawned, blue and hot. And still, very still. It seemed as if the town had fallen back upon itself and become once more an engraved picture. Life, running smoothly, had neutralised time, made it invisible, Monday, August the 10th, was a neutral date which fell inconspicuously into the long anonymous row of days without history.

Mrs. Gorgorini packed busily all morning, quite calm again. Rubina Bonanou's son went to work on Paviello's boat as usual; the Parisian treated him as if nothing had happened. Father Russello tried Mrs. Gorgorini's suggestion, and found that the ash made the church floor as clean as new. At the Custom-House, Marino Debonera, wanting to sign some documents, asked his assistant to tell him the date. It was some time before he got a reply. He remarked for the hundredth time: « We must get ourselves a calendar. This can't go on. »

As for Ithaca, the fact that the Minister of Welfare in person was now there, in full charge, somehow tucked her away in safety — into another kind of fixedness: that of the accomplished fact.

Towards evening, time had still not made a sound; the engraved picture had still not stirred an inch. Or had it? Was there not, perhaps, a small nameless wind running between the rooted houses?

ELVIRA GORGORINI

Mrs. Gorgorini could not understand herself. Usually she could hardly wait till August to move into the country. She hated Lixouri in the summer. But that evening a strange soft-heartedness had taken hold of her. It made her stay on at the Municipality café, with her sons and friends, much later than usual. Kitso Battistato was waiting with the car, laden and ready, but she found it impossible to go away.

She laughed frequently, without reason, from a soft full throat; and sighed, and kissed her little boy, and was kind to Siora Philarete, the bigot. She was moved to laughter and tears by the exquisite courtesy of Napoleon Bourdouvano. She spoke with Father Russello, who crossed

the square on his way to the monastery of Saint Spyridon, three miles away. He was to hold a service in the chapel there early in the morning; the nuns would put him up for the night. « Say a prayer for us, » said Mrs. Gorgorini.

The crowd on the square grew denser. The whole of Lixouri was there. The café lights blazed. A motor-launch came thudding out of the darkness from Argostoli, the capital on the opposite coast; it brought unexpected visitors.

Then Mrs. Gorgorini's elder son and his friends invaded the square, and burst into the Municipality café. They wanted to find the place where Alifonso, the café owner, kept the remainder of his ice-cream, half-melted by now, delicious. They told Alifonso it was too late to sell any more ice-cream. They armed themselves with anything they could find, wine glasses, coffee cups, tin plates, and scooped out big helpings of free ice-cream. More boys arrived, attracted by the noise. As there was no more ice-cream left for them, they fell upon the first group and took the ice-cream away from them. Pools of ice-cream spread on the floor like milk.

Mrs. Gorgorini watched the commotion from a small distance, with the older people. « The rascals, » they said. But what they were really thinking was that here was a wonderful sight; rather like a wedding. The boys looked like wedding guests under the bright lights — wedding guests standing in a full bright room, drinking and eating.

Mrs. Gorgorini finally got to her country-house at an incredible hour; sometime around midnight.

As she was very tired, she slept soundly, unlike the previous night. She did not hear the loud rumbling sound which preceded the earthquake of August the 11th.

MARINO DEBONERA

At 5.30 that morning, everybody was still asleep in Lixouri, even Marino Debonera, who was usually up very early.

For this reason, the earthquake of August 11th was the most unreal of all. Mixed with dreams, it grew like a stem out of the unreality of sleep, and tortured Marino Debonera with the strange, ineffectual movements of dreams. For some seconds he dreamt he was running away, in an endless, desperate race; then almost at the same time, he realised he was lying in bed, motionless, in the middle of the shaking room. Finally, he managed to open his eyes. He fixed them on a red glass vase standing on the dressing-table against the wall. As he looked, the vase wobbled, left, right, left, right, and then toppled over. It rolled

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

to the edge of the dressing-table and crashed to the floor. Now, he fixed his eyes on a mirror which hung right behind the spot where the vase had been. He waited for the mirror's turn. One of the nails that held the mirror was shaken out, the mirror hung askew. Then the second nail gave way; and the mirror fell. Marino Debonera now stared at the plain white piece of wall which the mirror had covered, above the dressing-table. He stared, patiently. But the wall remained intact. The earthquake was over.

FATHER RUSSELLO

The time was now 5.45 a. m. Father Russello was already on the road that led from the monastery of St. Spyridon to Lixouri to find out about his family. Observing the frightened faces of the nuns, he had been surprised at his own lack of fear. He had been calm and vacant while the earthquake lasted.

There had been no dream, no pinned-down movement for him; he had woken instantly — quick and clean. The only strangeness in his behaviour was that he forgot all about his robes. Yet this was a secure, mechanical habit; putting on his black robes, his uniform, first thing in the morning. Perhaps he had forgotten he was a priest. For he had come out of his cell in this trousers and shirt, like an ordinary man.

This was only the first symptom of the depersonalisation, the general loss of identity which was to follow.

KITSO BATTISTATO

Kitso Battistato wondered whether he ought to drive down to Lixouri this morning. What if there was another earthquake while the car was on the road? What if the whole car with its load of passengers should be swallowed up by the earth? His family laughed at his fears. The earthquake had been quite bad, but not terrible. It would be a pity to lose a whole day's earnings without serious reason. In the end Kitso drove away, still secretly reluctant. He was surprised to find quite a number of villagers waiting for him at the cross roads, all eager to get down to Lixouri. They piled into the station wagon, and began discussing the earthquake even before they were properly seated.

At that time, curiosity was still stronger than fear.

NAPOLEON BOURDOUVANO

In Lixouri, everybody seemed to be gathered on the pier. The town was wide awake, though it was still only 6.30 a. m.

Everybody was talking at once. Napoleon Bourdouvano was saying that this was the strongest earthquake they had known in a long time. Others said nonsense, this was an exaggeration, he was too young to have experienced a really violent shock. After all, there had been no victims so far, and all the houses seemed to be standing.

Suddenly a man emerged from a side street shouting. It was Theagenes, a taverna-keeper. Theagenes was shouting for help. He begged the people to come and help him dig out his wife and children. He had seven children, most of them very young. « Brothers, » he shouted, « brothers, help me. » The people who said the earthquake had not been so bad went silent. Theagenes told his story. This was what had happened. His house had been badly damaged by the earthquake. The floor of the main room where his wife was standing had fallen through. Instead of a floor, there was now a gaping hole edged with sharp splinters. The house was filled with a thick cloud of dust. The children, feeling frightened and lost, wandered into the room, blindly looking for their mother; and one by one fell into the hole and were torn by the sharp splinters.

There was a great stir now among the crowd on the quay. The people began to scatter. Some of them moved on to Theagenes' house.

Others hurried to their own houses, to search, examine, explore. They realised suddenly that not « everybody » was there. They began to look over one another's heads to find out who was missing. Absences seemed to gape everywhere.

Meanwhile, Napoleon went in search of Paviello the Parisian. His motor-launch would have to carry the wounded to the hospital in Argostoli without delay.

RUBINA BONANOU

Paviello was busy looking after his aunt, Rubina Bonanou. The whole front part of her house had collapsed with the earthquake. Paviello and her son carried her out of the house shrieking.

Rubina Bonanou shrieked not with fear, but with shame. She was still in her night-gown, and refused to be seen by her neighbours in this state. Her son begged her to have sense; but her mind seemed to have stopped on this single detail: her nakedness. She was agitated too, about another small matter; her new tomato sauce.

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

She had bottled it yesterday for the winter; twenty bottles, still warm. She screamed so loudly that her son left her with Paviello in the garden and ran back into the house to get her a dressing-gown and a pair of shoes; but about the tomato sauce he did nothing, no matter how she screamed.

MARINO DEBONERA

Marino Debonera had gone over to Argostoli that morning shortly after the earthquake, in order to discuss security measures with the customs official in the capital. Here he heard that disaster was drawing closer. The new victim was Sami, the third port of Cephalonia, twenty-five kilometres from Argostoli. One hundred and twelve people had been killed in the vicinity of Sami. Not a single house had been left standing in the district, except the public lavatories, which were built of concrete. The people in Lixouri did not believe Marino when he told them this on his return. They called him a madman and a liar. « Impossible, » they cried. But they believed him when he told them about the gendarme who was wounded in the foot and tried to steady himself by putting his arms around a tree; the earthquake thrust him against the tree with such violence that he died of internal haemorrhage. Then there was the story of the woman who got lost in the thick dust that rose over Sami after the earthquake. She walked straight off a cliff into the sea, thinking it to be a meadow. And then Marino Debonera told them how the corpse of Doctor Arseni was discovered, his feet sticking out of the ruins; they were two unmistakable feet, shod in pointed black shoes such as nobody else wore in the town; the people of Sami had recognised the shoes, not the body.

NAPOLÉON BOURDOUVANO

When Napoleon Bourdouvano returned to Lixouri, the first thing he did was to take his family out into the fields, with a couple of mattresses and some clothing. The sun was very hot, so they gathered under an olive-tree. They lunched on bread and white goat's cheese. There was nothing else. Napoleon's young brother said it was rather like a picnic, but Napoleon did not think so. He was beginning to feel hungry.

FATHER RUSSELLO

Father Russello still felt worried about the ikon of St. Gerasimos. The new earthquake had not damaged it, but he found no peace until

he discovered a better hiding-place for it. This time he put it under the spiral staircase that led to the belfry. Meanwhile, it occurred to him that the gravity of the disaster proved clearly that his service of invocation had not been enough. He decided to call the church committee in order to organise a litany for tomorrow afternoon.

RUBINA BONANOU

Rubina Bonanou was busy putting up a tent in her garden. It was made of a spare sail from Paviello's boat. It was a large sail, old, but neatly patched. She had had an excellent idea: she threw the sail over the long trellised passage in the garden where the vines grew. The two ends of the sail hung to the ground on either side, giving the illusion of walls. She hurried to Paviello's house and asked for a piece of sacking. She hung it up at one end of the passage, so that she had a feeling of enclosed space at last.

There she sat quietly on a petrol can. She gazed at her three cloth walls; and then up at her ceiling. She had never had such a beautiful ceiling before. It was green, leafy; the trellised vine-leaves were so thick that they hid the patched cloth completely.

ELVIRA GORGORINI

Earthquake or no earthquake, Mrs. Gorgorini decided that she must have space to put her things. She ordered the peasants to bring out the *stafidopana*, the sheets of rough white cloth that protected the drying currants from rain. She chose the best one, and told the men to drape it over three wooden poles. It made a good spacious tent. It was more luminous than an ordinary tent, because of the strong sunbeams hitting against the whiteness of the cloth.

Then she brought her things into the tent. There were so many that she grew flustered again. Soon she did not quite know what she was doing. She hung her big, wrought-iron chandelier on a lemon-tree. She put her sewing things in the ice box. She stood an elaborately framed photograph of the Unfortunate One on a hat box.

KITSO BATTISTATO

Kitso's station wagon arrived at Mrs. Gorgorini's house at sunset. Kitso was dog-tired, for he had been sent on a hundred errands. He told Mrs. Gorgorini that her elder son who had gone to Lixouri to pack up the Sèvres set would not be back tonight. He would sleep in Lixouri.

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

STORYTELLER

A brief sunset. Then twilight on the town. But the lights of Lixouri went on later than usual that night. And they seemed more numerous and brighter, for they were no longer hidden in houses, but out in the open. They lit up a scene very different from what I saw in that first, still picture. The dark gardens and courtyards, usually deserted at this late hour, were noisily inhabited, astir with voices, pattering movements, thudding, knocking sounds, sometimes laughter. It was the houses' turn to be dark — silent — empty. Private fences and walls were repeatedly violated, as neighbours crossed over into one another's gardens to borrow an extra blanket, a spoon, an ounce of coffee. Many people lit fires to cook a meal. Many had guests to stay with them that night. Siora Philarete, the bigot, put up Mrs. Gorgorini's son in her tent. Under his olive-tree, Napoleon Bourdouvano entertained Theagenes and his unhappy family. Rubina Bonanou had invited her niece to spend the night with her under the sail. So it was everywhere, until people felt they had never been so numerous, and Lixouri never so large as on this candle-lit night.

By nine o'clock they had all settled down; but they did not sleep. As the hours went beating by, and the past and present drew further and further apart, they lay under the royal night sky and talked. There were rumours. People said that on the other side of the island where the earthquake had been stronger, peasants sleeping on the ground had heard great and secret noises coming from the bowels of the earth; these were sure signs of terrible things.

RUBINA BONANOU

Rubina Bonanou knew that those were not the only signs. The dogs had never ceased barking the previous night. Tonight it was the same. The moment the sun disappeared, the dogs started howling, and had not ceased for a moment. She sat in the door of her trellised tent and listened to the distant, many-voiced howling in the night.

MARINO DEBONERA

Marino Debonera had also heard tales of mysterious happenings. Soon after the earthquake, the water in a well near Argostoli had disappeared, only to re-appear in another well half a mile away, which had been dry until then. Five hours later the water had returned to the first

well; the people near by had suddenly heard it bubbling in the silence. In another village on the east coast, a submerged rock had pushed itself out of the sea, covered with crustacea, smelling of seaweed and mud. All this proved that the earth was ill at ease.

KITSO BATTISTATO

In the country, Kitso Battistato crouched by Mrs. Gorgorini's fire, and told her he had heard a man saying that the earthquake in Sami had made a noise like a thousand fish frying in a great frying-pan.

Others had said it had been like a million window-panes breaking at the same time. Nobody had ever heard of such a thing before. The island had caught a strange disease, it seemed, and Kitso said he did not like it at all.

NAPOLEON BOURDOUVANO

On the whole, Napoleon Bourdouvano had a good time that night, going from garden to garden, from tent to tent, laughing at people's fears, boasting about his own lack of fear. Rubina Bonanou was the last person he sat with on his round of visits. Towards ten o'clock, he left her, with a flourish of his walking-stick, announcing that other people could have their moonlight picnics if they liked, but he would sleep in his house tonight, not on the cold ground.

But when he reached his house, he found it so dark, already so irrevocably separated from the world of the living that he decided to go back to his family under the olive-tree, because the women would surely be worrying about him.

(MUSIC)

STORYTELLER

All night long, the houses waited, dark and abandoned. But no one came. They were never lived in again.

(MUSIC)

STORYTELLER

Even when the next day dawned, the houses were not accepted back into the world of the living. People walked into them, trod on the creaking floors, opened doors and windows. But not to restore — to

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

take away. They took away trunks and suitcases, shoes lying under beds and coats hanging on pegs. They took away cupboards and pictures, which had not been moved for years, and now left white stains on the walls that had known them.

Thus, in spite of the new day and the sunlight, the houses were pushed further back into a condemned world.

A few houses were left untouched, unstripped of their chattels. But they were no better off. For the shutters were closed, they remained closed, and no sunlight entered them at all.

Then came the thing that broke all the dark houses once and for all. It came at 11.25 a. m., on August 12th.

MARINO DEBONERA

At 11.23 a. m., Marino Debonera was in the act of handing over a 10,000-drachma note to the owner of the taverna in which he had just had an early lunch of boiled meat and broth.

FATHER RUSSELLO

At the same moment, Father Russello was staggering across the church square with a big black trunk which contained some of his possessions. He was carrying it from his house to the straw hut in which he had put his family.

ELVIRA GORGORINI

Meanwhile, Mrs. Gorgorini was hanging up damp kitchen towels on a line in her garden. Her little boy came up to her, whining. He wanted to go to the lavatory. She was too tired to carry buckets of water into the house lavatory. So she told the little boy to go and do his business under the lemon-trees.

NAPOLEON BOURDOUVANO

At 11.20 a. m. Napoleon Bourdouvano took a break from work and went for coffee. But Alifonso the café proprietor said he would have to make it himself. Nobody dared stay in the café the time that was needed to make a cup of coffee. So Napoleon drank fizzy lemonade. As he drew at the bottle, Napoleon pulled a face; the lemonade was tepid.

RUBINA BONANOU

Rubina Bonanou was tired. She had picked figs and tomatoes in the sun all morning. It was the only food she could get. She crept under her tent, but found the air stifling. So she brought out a camp bed, placed it under a garden-tree, by a small well, and lay down to rest.

KITSO BATTISTATO

At 11.24 a. m. Kitso Battistato sat in his station wagon on the inner square, waiting for passengers. The wireless was on. He listened to a song called, « Women have no heart, but we love them. »

Suddenly the song stopped — in the middle of a phrase. Kitso stooped forward to turn the wireless knob, but found he could not get hold of it because the car was shaking.

NAPOLEON BOURDOUVANO

The bottle of lemonade was torn from Napoleon's hand. Dazed, he stopped to pick it up. At once he lost his balance, because the ground was not where he expected it to be. He flung his legs and arms about in all directions, trying to find the earth again. Suddenly his left foot was gripped, bitten by two powerful jaws. He looked down, and saw that his foot was caught in a deep crack. He tried to pull it out, but the effort made him crash to the ground. He did not try to move after this, but kept his eyes fixed on a lamppost a few yards away. He counted the times it swayed from right to left, left to right, as if it were made of rubber. But his attention was diverted by the statue of the Bishop. He saw it sailing noiselessly through the air, the two white hands outstretched.

RUBINA BONANOU

Rubina Bonanou held on to the shaking camp bed with her hands, her feet, her teeth. Even her back and thighs seemed to acquire a clutching power. Finally the bed toppled over, and she rolled to the ground, still clutching. Once on the ground, she still rolled, the way children roll down a grass slope, until she found herself on the brink of the well. Screaming, she scrambled upwards, away from the well. It seemed as if she were climbing a very steep hill. She managed to

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

get on her feet and started running. But she could not go very far. Tall walls knelt slowly before her, the way elephants kneel.

All around her there was this ludicrous performance of kneeling houses. The way was blocked on all sides. Unbelieving, she stopped screaming.

FATHER RUSSELLO

Father Russello dropped his trunk; it fell with a crash, and broke open. He leapt forward and clutched the railings outside a garden. The ground heaved so violently that for a moment he wanted to abandon his absurd standing position; he wanted to roll on the ground, give himself up to the madness of the earthquake. Yet he only clung to the railings tighter. He felt a wetness in his hands. He thought he was sweating, but when he opened one palm, he saw that it was blood; wild, thorny roses grew round the railings. He did not leave hold. In the church square, he saw people flopping to the ground, as if their legs had been cut under them. He did not think of looking upwards at his church. Suddenly he felt a warm draught across his face. He looked up. The church was no longer there; the air now circulated freely in the empty space where the church had been.

ELVIRA GORGORINI

First Mrs. Gorgorini gripped the line on which she had been hanging her kitchen towels. It broke in her hands. So she began running from tree to tree; pine-cones rained from the trees and hammered on her back. Soon she did not have to run; she was flung from one tree to another swiftly, like a rubber ball. She called loudly for her little son.

In her panic she forgot she had sent him to the lemon-trees to do his business. She thought he was trapped in the house-lavatory. As she looked in the direction of the house she gave a great cry, for instead of the house she saw nothing but a thick cloud of dust.

MARINO DEBONERA

The owner of the taverna did not have time to take the 10,000-drachma note from Marino Debonera. As Marino held it up, the wall opposite him fell backwards, like the lid off a cardboard box. Suddenly there was bright daylight in the taverna. Mechanically, Marino began

walking backwards, the note still in his hands. He bumped against chairs and tables, because he was not looking where he was going. He eyes were fixed on the extraordinary new piece of blue sky, in the roof of the taverna. At last he found himself in the street. He turned round and walked the normal way. His legs carried him haphazard — limp and unknowing as a puppet's legs. He reached the sea sooner than he expected. The pier had creased. Sea-water spouted through the cracks. The sea was a muddy bubbling yellow.

NAPOLEON BOURDOUVANO

When the earthquake came to an end, Napoleon Bourdouvano heard a great silence through his closed eyes. He realised then that the earthquake had made a tremendous noise, though it had seemed soundless at the time. All he could remember, listening backwards, was the sound of church bells ringing very quickly, by themselves.

He sat up, pushing stones and pieces of wood off his body. He looked around, but had to close his eyes quickly; the air was nothing but dust. Between sneezes, he tried to recognise the smell in the air. At first he thought it was gun powder, then he decided it was sulphur. It reminded him of the vineyards in the month of June, the time for sulphur-spraying against the diseases of the vine.

He stood up. As he peered around he began to see that there were people on the square after all. The great dark dust was inhabited. People began emerging from it, dust-coloured. Then he realised that he too had become visible. A man he vaguely remembered caught at the lapels of his coat, and shouted with an intensity that resembled anger, « Where are my children? » Other people halted in front of him in their frenzied rush around the square; they stopped only a moment, asking the same questions: « Have you seen my father? my wife? my child? Have you seen Maria? Anzulo? Grigori? » Hardly waiting for an answer, they rushed on, and others came, often the same ones over again.

KITSO BATTISTATO

After the earthquake Kitso Battistato found himself lying on the ground beside the station wagon, which was leaning over to one side where two wheels had fallen in a crack. As soon as he stood up a distracted girl, who was dripping with water from head to foot, threw herself at him.

She cried words that Kitso could not understand: « I am burning, help me — don't let me burn alive. »

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

It was only later in the day that this was explained, when her miraculous story became known. The girl had been cooking lunch on a small oil-stove when the earthquake began. A large piece of wall fell upon the stove and upset it. The burning oil spilt on the girl's clothes, and soon she was on fire. As she stumbled round the room screaming, part of the upper floor gave way, breaking upon the water storage. The water poured down on the girl in great sheets, and put out the flames that covered her. But for some time she remained with the burning sensation, and could not believe in the water.

MARINO DEBONERA

The dust began to lift. Half an hour after the earthquake, the air was clear again. What Marino Debonera saw then made him think: « I am not in Lixouri. I am in some other place. » The first row of houses along the pier was gone, showing him that the second row, behind it, was gone as well; and the third, and fourth. And the last row of fallen houses showed him that there was a hill, and a landscape behind Lixouri, which he had never properly seen before, because the houses had been in the way.

And then Marino, too, felt the strange new breeze of emptiness, which had touched Father Russello's face as he stood before his fallen church.

RUBINA BONANOU

Rubina Bonanou felt no such breeze. She was trapped among the ruins, in a corner of her garden, surrounded on all sides by tall, jumbled stone. She tried to find a way out; she tried to guess where the street was, but the ruins were all the same, and gave no clue. Finally, Rubina climbed painfully up the remnants of a stone staircase to a crooked roof where she hoped to get a better view. At a distance of six yards she saw the top of a small walnut-tree emerging through the ruins. That was safe; it grew in Paviello's garden; she recognized it. But then she got a shock. Beyond the tree there stretched wave upon wave of jumbled stone, like a great meadow in its uniformity. The streets were buried under the houses that had once stood there. Rubina stepped down from her post of observation, too staggered to speak. An immense and endless discouragement filled her.

FATHER RUSSELLO

Father Russello was about to run to his straw hut, when he heard a voice calling from a crumbled house in front of him. He climbed into the house through a large opening filled with stones and rubbish. He could hear the voice clearly now. It came from below, and said, « Christians, let me out. Christians dig me out of here. » Father Russello started picking up stones, boards and tiles, and throwing them into the square. It seemed a futile job; there was so much of it; and he could not tell just where the man was. He called, « Shout again, so that I may know where you are. »

But the voice was silent. Growing desperate, Father Russello scooped up whole armfuls of litter, dropping half of it before he had time to throw it into the square. Then there was a small, trickling sound beneath him; and he heard the voice once more, saying, « You've saved me. I can breathe. » Relieved, Father Russello went on with his work, at a steadier pace — when another voice came to him from the other end of the house. « Help, help, » it said faintly, and there was sighing and moaning...

Father Russello stumbled over to the place where the second voice came from. But as he moved, something broke beneath him; and the first voice was heard again, desperate, for Father Russello's sudden movement had caused the precious outlet of air to be blocked.

And so Father Russello had to run from one end of the house to the other, lifting a brick here, removing a beam there, while the two voices called, maddeningly, tearing him apart. After two hours' toil, he freed the first man, who was badly bruised and shaken, but otherwise all right. The second man he found dead. He left the ruined house just in time. At 2.06 p. m. there was another earthquake.

NAPOLEON BOURDOUVANO

Down by the harbour some of the injured had been laid out on the pier. Napoleon Bourdouvano was sent off to find a doctor. He walked away at a great pace, but had to stop after a few yards. He realised that he did not know the way; in his own town. As he kicked at a pile of large stones, he discovered a small child, half-hidden beneath a poster advertising boot polish. He took the child in his arms, without looking at it. At last, he found the old Doctor Oldelinis sitting on a stone, surrounded by crying people. Napoleon pushed the child in the doctor's face. The old doctor fumbled at the child's clothing for a moment. Then he said, « The child is dead. Whose is it? » Nobody knew, nobody could say. As they were wondering what to

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

do with it, a man pushed through the crowd with quiet brutality. He looked at the child and said, « It is mine. » He glanced around him briefly, then he picked up the corpse neatly, slung it on his shoulder and walked away.

ELVIRA GORGORINI

Even when the earthquake was over, Mrs. Gorgorini went on screaming steadily until she saw her little boy emerge from the lemon-grove. Then she started weeping. For three hours she refused to move from her tree, refused to do anything at all, not even look up at her ruined house. When the next earthquake came at two o'clock, she slid to the ground and crouched at the foot of her tree, nodding weakly. A little later Kitso came to see her and told her the news of Lixouri. She listened to him in exhausted silence. One moment she mourned the country-house, for it had been the house the Unfortunate One loved best of all; this was the house where he had sat in the evenings, by the jasmine bush, drinking wine with his peasants. The next moment she mourned the Lixouri house, because of the « treasures, » and the piano, and the ball-room. Later, her elder son came from Lixouri and told her that most of the « treasures » had been saved. This made her feel better. She suddenly found her old energy again, and spent the afternoon boiling eggs — thirty fresh eggs. This would be the way, she thought, to solve the problem of food.

MARINO DEBONERA

As soon as he could leave the frantic confusion of Lixouri, Marino Debonera set off for Lepeda, a place three miles away, where his old mother lived. He reached the house in twenty minutes; he had never done it so fast. In the ruined village he recognised the house by the flowery design of the exposed wallpaper in the drawing-room. He had thought it was brown; in the sunlight he saw it was dark red, rather ugly. He found his mother trapped in the dining-room. The door was jammed by the weight of the damaged ceiling. Marino broke down the door, and an avalanche of plaster fell on him from above. He scrambled over it and carried his mother out to the garden. He went back into the house for food and blankets. As he clambered over the ruins, a plank gave way, and he found himself dangling in a well, holding on to the brink by the force of his outstretched elbows. He called the little maid, Nausicaä; but she was entangled in a mass of twisted wire, and could not help him. He called to the peasant. There was no answer; the man seemed to have become stupid.

The third time Marino called, the peasant came and helped him out. Then he said in a dull voice, « Sior Marino, let's go away from here. I have seen the dead. » Marino asked the man to show him where the dead were. He showed Marino a man whose face had been smashed. One of his arms was buried under stone; the other was flung out stiffly; a watch gleamed brightly on his wrist. His belly protruded strangely; a small beam had fallen across his chest, and another across his thighs, so that the belly bulged out in between. Marino wandered away from the corpse aimlessly. He saw a man trying to pull something out of the ruins. Marino asked wearily if it was heavy, if he wanted help. Then he saw it was the body of a girl. She was dead too; her skull cracked. It was the maid. Marino said her name: Mandina. Tentatively at first, Mandina Legatou. After a few repetitions, it became easier. He helped the man heave the girl across his shoulder.

NAPOLEON BOURDOUVANO

All afternoon Napoleon's energy gnawed at him. He walked in and out of the ruins asking for something difficult and complicated to do. It was the same urge that had made him enjoy going on odd errands for people in the old days. Most people had lost their identity now: the grocer was no longer a grocer, currant-growers and fishermen were alike, but Napoleon had lost only his walking-stick. He was irrepressible and indestructible. And so he was in great demand everywhere. Siora Philarete, the bigot, turned to him in despair and begged him to bring out her best ikon before her house collapsed completely. Napoleon was in and out of the house in a moment. When one of the women came upon old Sior Mimino, the quaint old man who taught French to the land-owners' children, lying helpless in a back street with a broken shoulder, Napoleon carried him half a mile in his arms to the emergency hospital.

RUBINA BONANOU

Rubina Bonanou was rescued by her son late that afternoon. He dug a way out for her with a pick-axe and took her to Paviello's garden. The Parisian's house was in ruins; but several people were already gathered in an old shed where he kept his sails and oars. Most of the refugees were women. The men were still busy out of doors. In spite of the great change, the custom of the men coming home last remained. The shed was full of women's voices; now and then, a loud cry, a sob, or a distinct phrase: « Ships will come

tomorrow.» Out in the open, the men came and went in the red evening, picking among the ruins, or preparing the dead for burial.

Towards sunset, a small procession appeared on the main road. People were bringing their dead out into the fields for burial. The dead were carried in sacks, trunks, on donkeys, in wheelbarrows, or on a man's shoulders. Rubina Bonanou and the other women came out of the shed and stood on the edge of the road, watching the procession. They counted fifteen dead. They became silent — even the mourners among them — so as not to lose count.

FATHER RUSSELLO

Father Russello's first sacerdotal duties after the earthquake were not offered to the dead, but to the new-born. On his way back to his hut, he heard a voice calling from a dusty garden. He entered it, and saw a large family huddled beneath a tree; in their midst lay a very small baby, wailing.

The baby's grandmother begged Father Russello to christen it. In the earthquake it had choked in the dust until they all thought it would die. The grandmother had knelt in the dust and lifted the baby three times, saying, «In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, I name this child Nicholas,» so that the baby would die a Christian. Yet now that the immediate danger was over and the baby still alive, the family wished the baptism to be repeated by a priest. Father Russello said there was not much more he could do, for he had no oil, no incense, not even water. But the family begged very hard, and produced a bucket of muddy water. And Father Russello consented. The family were content at last. They kissed Father Russello's hand several times in gratitude. Then they invited him to have some squashed melon with them.

MARINO DEBONERA

Passing by the childrens' park, Marino Debonera thought he heard voices. He entered the park; at first he could see nothing. A small flame from a cigarette-lighter leapt in the dark; further along, one struck a match. Flushed faces floated above the flames. Marino was greeted anonymously — his hands were touched, his cheeks kissed; no names were exchanged. The desperate voices of identification were silent now; one did not hear the question which had rung out after the disaster: «Where is my father? my wife? my child? Where is Maria? Anzulo? Grigori?»

Perhaps it was because of the dark. Perhaps it was because people now had two very striking things in common: they were alive; and they possessed nothing.

Marino moved from group to group, listening to the voices, throwing in his own. Here too the people were saying: ships will come. Then they spoke of Mount Aenos, which had wide-open cracks. They spoke of the cracks in the area of Elios — so deep that a man riding a mule had disappeared into the earth, except for his head, which had been chopped off as the lips of the crack came together again. One man reported a story from the Sissia district, where whole acres of land had floated out to sea, forming a small island. The farmer who owned those fields wanted to swim across to it, because his best beehives were on that piece of land. But his family had not let him go.

At midnight Marino walked out of the park in search of water. He tried to find the water front, where the sea would be his guide. After a while he saw the flicker of a torch-light in the distance. He went to it, and found himself on the quayside. A row of still bodies wrapped in blankets lay along the quay; dark figures of doctors and nurses stepped carefully over them, talking low. They were waiting for the ships. Marino asked a nurse if she knew where he could find water. She said there was none. He was almost relieved; he could go back to the park now and join the people in the dark, the anonymous voices.

STORYTELLER

This first night without lights in Cephalonia was the still point which I found at the bottom of the picture as I travelled inwards through its frame. This was the still point, the ultimate point; the heart of the story, protected by darkness.

(MUSIC)

STORYTELLER

From then on, all was but a return. A gradual return to the surface, away from the darkness.

(MUSIC)

STORYTELLER

Shortly after midnight, there appeared a red glow in the sky. At first, it was believed to be the dawn. It turned out to be a fresh disaster: fire. Several houses in Argostoli were in flames.

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

The new day brought good news as well as disaster. When the sun rose, it was seen that the ships had arrived.

Fire and sun dispelled the darkness. The people emerged, and gradually returned to separateness.

NAPOLEON BOURDOUVANO

Napoleon Bourdouvano helped the sailors from the American ship cut down some wood for fuel. They had promised to cook an enormous meal for all the people of Lixouri. Napoleon believed in their good faith and sense of justice: but he thought it would do no harm to become their personal friend. Perhaps they would give him a double portion of food, or a little water.

When the sailors began serving hot soup to a long queue of people, Napoleon realised they were even fairer than he supposed.

Each man who received a plate of food was asked to dip his thumb in a red tincture that smelt of iodine. This meant that one could only queue up once. Napoleon was very cross at first. Then he found an old piece of lemon-peel and rubbed his thumb with it while the mark was still fresh. It did not disappear completely. He scraped his thumb patiently against a rough stone, and was soon ready to take place in the queue again. His appetite had come back to him in all its glory.

RUBINA BONANOU

In addition to the soup, Rubina Bonanou received a tin of sardines. She examined it carefully; then she put it in her pocket with a look of determination. She went up to Napoleon Bourdouvano, and begged him to have the sardines sent to her elder son, a merchant in Athens. Napoleon was the only man who could arrange it, for he knew all the captains and ships. Napoleon tried to make her understand her son did not need sardines. There had been no earthquake in Athens or the rest of Greece. She smiled in a knowing way, and told him to send the sardines anyway. Napoleon took the tin, and later returned it secretly to her younger son.

FATHER RUSSELLO

Father Russello conducted his first funeral service that morning. He buried Mandina, the girl whom Marino had seen in the ruins of his house. Her twin sister had been with her when she was killed.

They had been found, still clasped together, by their uncle; one alive, the other dead.

Father Russello never forgave himself for what happened that morning; he confused the sisters, and called the living sister by the name of Mandina.

The girl was buried in the monastery cemetery, although it was intended only for nuns. Her funeral was only the first of the day. More and more came that day, until the cells were filled with waiting dead.

ELVIRA GORGORINI

On the second day after the earthquake, Mrs. Gorgorini came down to Lixouri to see her house. She walked straight past it without recognising it. Her son took her up the stairs that led to the first floor, which had no ceiling. The first thing Mrs. Gorgorini saw, standing out vividly among the fallen plaster, was the red and black wings of her little boy's Carnival costume. She wept, but not without pride, for while she wept she could not help thinking that many strange things must have been found in the other houses of Lixouri, old letters and slippers and umbrellas, perhaps even a powder-puff, but surely nothing as bright and glamorous as a pair of black and scarlet Carnival wings.

In the garden next door, Mrs. Gorgorini's neighbour, Siora Philarete, wandered in ritualistic circles, holding a broken tile on which were heaped a few grains of burning incense.

KITSO BATTISTATO

The third day after the earthquake, Kitso Battistato felt very stiff, for he had slept in his car three nights running. In spite of his stiffness, he joined a team of taxi drivers in clearing up the main road that led to the villages.

After three hours' work at the road, Kitso walked down to the pier, hot and dirty. He noticed that someone had hung up a mirror on a scraggy pepper-tree; under the mirror stood an ancient three-legged chest of drawers. A voice asked him, « What about a shave? » He passed his hand over his three-day beard and thought with a shock: « Of course, one is supposed to shave. » The barber waited for him by the chest of drawers, smiling patiently. He had an assured expression. « I'm not worried, » he said. « They'll begin coming soon. They've forgotten about their faces now, but sooner or later their beards will begin itching them, and they will come to me. »

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

FATHER RUSSELLO

On the first Sunday after the earthquake, the people of Lixouri remembered what a churchbell sounded like. For five days, the bells had been silent. They lay in the street, choked with mud. But on Sunday, Father Russello held his first morning service since the earthquake.

He placed a table in the middle of a meadow, near the Commercial School. On the table he put a small glass of wine, and a tin plate filled with pasteurised American bread sliced in cubes, for Holy Communion.

Then Father Russello cleaned the fallen bells of St. Gerasimos, and carried them all the way to the meadow. He hung them from a window in the Commercial School. He had to ring them gently, because they were not fastened very securely. However, the people heard the unfamiliar sound, and came. The congregation was the largest Father Russello had ever had. He was pleased that there was plenty of space, if nothing else.

MARINO DEBONERA

In the week that followed, many people left Cephalonia. All the wounded were taken away to Patras and Athens. Then the children went, to be put in orphanages and childrens' towns. Then it was the turn of the old people from the Paupers' Home. They were flown to Corfu in a helicopter, and almost died of fright on the way.

Marino Debonera was among those who remained. When the children went, and when the old people went, he was glad, and relieved. But when others left, more and more of them, especially members of the upper class, he began to feel a strange, chill anguish, a small contraction of loneliness.

He became suspicious, touchy. When he spoke to the peasants, he stood on his guard, ready to mark any sign of newly assumed arrogance.

NAPOLEON BOURDOUVANO

At this time the Government began distributing tents. Napoleon Bourdoubano was quick to find out which were the best tents. There were the dark green ones, square or rectangular; those were roomy, but they gave out an unbearable smell, and grew suffocating in the noon hours. Then there were the U.S. navy tents, white or khaki; they

were very pleasant, but too small for most Lixouri families. The best were the ones with a double covering like the ones the Army had chosen for their H.Q. in Lixouri.

Many people still remained in their old tents, made of currant-cloth. But those were very low. One often met people complaining of permanently aching backs.

On the whole, Napoleon enjoyed living in a tent. Most of all, he enjoyed keeping all his clothes in a suitcase, for there were no wardrobes. He had rarely had occasion to use a suitcase, « We are travellers, » he said, « we are travelling lords, we cannot do without our suitcases. »

RUBINA BONANOU

The cats did not like the tents. They missed the tiled roofs. They searched everywhere, but found none. So they scrambled up the tents, between the double covering; and slithered down, and tried again, not letting Rubina Bonanou find any sleep. She was easily frightened now; sometimes the noise of the cats' claws on the tent sounded like rain, other times it seemed as if stones pelted against the tent, meaning destruction.

KITSO BATTISTATO

What Kitso Battistato missed most at first was cigarettes. Waiting in the car for passengers was difficult without cigarettes.

There were still very few passengers. If there was another earthquake, people would rather it found them on their two feet, not in an unpredictable machine. Claustrophobia was general. Kitso himself, while driving his car alone, often felt uneasy. He did not like the sound of his wheels on the ground. It was a different sound — abnormal, hollow. He had the impression that all noises — the rattling of a cart over the pier, the trot of a horse, the fall of a heavy object, even his own footsteps — had a peculiar echo; as if the ground were no longer the same.

STORYTELLER

Worse than the strange new sounds by far was the silence, the new silence. Silences no longer passed unnoticed. Now they were each a pocket of possibility in which another earthquake might be hidden, in which the now familiar rumble might be heard. Silence had acquired a new density. It had a way of building up into a rising intensity — like the wail of a siren. Each silence made the earthquake possible. One listened to silence as never before.

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

ELVIRA GORGORINI

Mrs. Gorgorini had come to hate her clock. It hammered loudly in the silence of her empty tent. She could not remember that clocks ticked as loudly as this in the old houses. She decided that clocks are only meant for the safety and solidity of houses. So she ceased to wind it up. Perhaps her little boy would like the tent better without the clock, and no longer refuse to sleep in it. She had begged him many times to sleep with her in the tent with her other son. But it was no use; as soon as darkness fell, the boy took his blanket and walked out into the fields, saying that he would rather have nothing heavier above his head than the sky. Mrs. Gorgorini was worried. He had been pink and white and round; now he had darkened. The colour of his hair had not changed, yet he had darkened, somehow, inside himself.

For this and other reasons, Mrs. Gorgorini had little sleep. At night, she lay and listened to the silence, and thought the absence of the clock did not make much difference after all.

FATHER RUSSELLO

But it was not long before new sounds broke out in Lixouri, to help to save the people from the silence. Building sounds; hammering, sawing, knocking. On August 23rd he started building the new church of St. Gerasimos. He needed no help; he had been a carpenter before becoming a priest. All the timber he needed he took from the old church. Most of the boards were coloured; some were painted blue — those had made up the ceiling; others were white, and had once covered the walls; and others were ochre, part of the old floor. The coloured boards Father Russello kept for the outer walls of the new church. He arranged the colours — blue, white, and ochre — in patterns. He said to his friends, laughing, « I have turned my church inside out. » Last of all he built a belfry. It was only a rough piece of scaffolding, but it was solid, and the bells hung free and easy from it.

The church of St. Gerasimos was the first new building to be completed in Lixouri. It took Father Russello ten days to finish it.

NAPOLEON BOURDOUVANO

Meanwhile, the Army sent round teams of soldiers to pull down the damaged houses and clear the ground. The clearing away of the ruins revealed many late horrors. Napoleon Bourdouvano was present

when the soldiers dug up Trombetas' taverna. Beneath a large piece of roof, they found the remains of Trombetas, the owner. The soldiers had to tie their handkerchiefs around their faces, like doctors' masks. They picked him up as best they could, and put him in a trunk. In this trunk he was carried to the cemetery.

MARINO DEBONERA

When Marino Debonera walked through the ruined town, he no longer used his eyes so much as his nose. His nose acquired a permanent, suspicious twitch. A bad smell in the market-place: was it a dog? a cat? or a man? But all the same, as long as the weather was warm, people preferred to stay out of doors. The tremors continued. Marino Debonera counted as many as twelve one night. The scientists said this was normal: the bowels of the earth were just settling down, making themselves comfortable. Not everybody believed the scientists. When a month went by and the tremors persisted, a new rumour went round: the island was condemned: there would be another big earthquake, and then the island would sink. Many people swore that the coast line was very much lower than it had been in the past.

KITSO BATTISTATO

Kitso Battistato believed the rumours. He had heard strange stories in a small fishing village on the other side of the island, where he had spent a night. The fishermen spoke of the village called Kakava. Once upon a time there had been a great catastrophe, and Kakava disappeared under the sea. Now, on a windless day, the fishermen swore they could see the roofs of the sunken village clustered at the bottom of the sea.

The rains would begin before long. When they did, the waters would begin to rise, a few inches every day, until the broken roofs of Lixouri, like the roofs of Kakava lay at the bottom of the sea.

FATHER RUSSELLO

The rains would begin before long. Therefore one should think of building, not of Kakava. You must build, build, Father Russello repeated wherever he went. He visited his parishioners and watched them build their wooden sheds. He shared his craftsman's experience with them. For instance, he took small bits of hard lead which had once served to hold stone walls together, he tied them to a string

and said, « Now you have a perfect plumb-line; your sheds needn't be crooked any longer. »

A passing officer saw Father Russello labouring in the midst of the builders, and greeted him with the words, « Hail, ingenious Odysseus! » Father Russello liked the compliment, but on second thoughts he pulled down his black sleeves and put on his stove-pipe hat, as he was not sure Odysseus was the right thing for a priest to be.

ELVIRA GORGORINI

At first, Mrs. Gorgorini refused to build a shed. She clung to her tent, saying that since she could no longer have a proper house, she would rather have nothing at all. Other people's losses were small; their houses had been one-storied; they could easily rise again. For her it was not so easy.

Her son, knowing winter to be near, built a shed secretly in the back garden. When Mrs. Gorgorini discovered this, she cried, « It is a hen-coop, not a house. My son wants me to live in a hen-coop. »

The only thing that reconciled her to the shed was the hope that she could bring out some of her belongings at last. Her treasures need no longer rot in trunks in the garden.

Her joy was brief. There was more space in the shed than in the tent, but still not enough space. She had a table now, but it was only big enough for her son's dinner, not for the bowls and vases; the ceilings were too low for chandeliers, and the beds only good to sleep in, not to be decorated with silk cushions. She had to make an agonising selection. One day, it was the turn of the Sèvres set; next day, out came the silver sweet boxes offered at her sister's wedding in Johannesburg, long ago. Next day, these were sacrificed to make place for the Italian king-fisher bowl. Every day brought a small death, and a resurrection.

One day, she could bear this rationing no longer, and brought out more things than the shed could hold. The hens invaded the crammed shed while she was away at the well, and broke three crystal ashtrays, one porcelain lamp, and a plaster statuette of Verdi which had once stood on the piano. When Mrs. Gorgorini saw the damage, she sat on the bed and wept. From where she sat, she had a view of the entire shed: the piece of sacking which served as a doormat; the family tooth brushes standing in a glass on the dining-room shelf; the stacks of old grey newspapers for the distant lavatory; the old sheet that hid the shame of underwear hanging from a nail in the wall. She saw all this, and knew she was beaten. She curled up on the bed and wept, « We are gypsies. We shall be gypsies for ever. »

KAY CICELLIS

From that day, she worked harder, and more humbly. When neighbours praised her beautiful shed, saying it was almost as good as a house, she had a soothing answer ready. « It is not bad, » she said. « As gypsies go, it is not bad. »

RUBINA BONANOU

Rubina Bonanou's shed was solid and well made, but dark. Her nephew Paviello had put only one window in it, because he had been short of glass. One day, in the grocer's shop, Rubina found large rolls of extraordinary paper; it was covered with small green leaves and red berries. The grocer told her it was used in Athens to cover walls, tables, or shelves. Rubina bought several sheets of it, and covered every existing surface in her shed with red berries and green leaves. She found it livened up the shed considerably.

ELVIRA GORGORINI

Mrs. Gorgorini laughed ironically when Kitso Battistato told her about the extraordinary paper. She knew what sort of paper he meant. The presents she received from her sister in Johannesburg at Christmas-time used to be wrapped in such paper. It was called Christmas paper. People should be told about this, and not use it like ordinary paper. This was going a little too far, even for gypsies.

FATHER RUSSELLO

This was the way that life flowed on; people were settling down. There came the day when Father Russe'lo conducted his first marriage ceremony since the earthquake. The bride was Adriana, the grammar-school teacher, and the bridegroom Miltiades the cheese maker. Nothing was missing at the ceremony this time, except a house for the newlyweds. Miltiades had spent all his savings building a shed for his parents.

MARINO DEBONERA

Marino Debonera had grown into a dark prophet. He spoke of the cold, joyless future, of the wind and rain waiting at the corner of October, of the undying anger in the bowels of the earth, the persisting signs.

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

All was not over. On the peak behind the village named Prophet Elias, trees and shrubs had gone dry. The foliage flamed red and brown in a sudden premature autumn. Then the splendid colours disappeared; and the people saw that the trees were quite dead, and would never have leaves again.

FATHER RUSSELLO

Life was flowing on, people were settling down, insisted Father Russello. Yet he had to agree that there were signs, cries from the past which did not let one forget.

At a christening the other day, he had been asked to name the child Seismia. He tried to dissuade the parents, and give the child a good ancient name, like Parthenope. The parents had insisted. And the little girl was christened Seismia, daughter of the earthquake.

KITSO BATTISTATO

The ground was being cleared up everywhere. Kitso Battistato could drive his station wagon without difficulty now. The roads were broader and smoother than they had ever been.

Then one evening, as he was leaving Lixouri for home, the electric lights went on again, putting an end to the reign of darkness and candles, pushing the disaster one step further away. Kitso was glad at first. It meant he would not have to use his battery so much to light up the dark streets.

But as he drove through Lixouri, ruined and illuminated, he found electricity was absurd, and ug'y. The light gave the ruins a fixed air which they had not had before.

STORYTELLER

And here in the huts and the tents, green or white or navy blue, the people waited for time to move on as before. They waited like people in a train, at a small railway station: listening for the jolt which means that the engine has been hooked on to the wagons, and that the journey will now be continued. But there was no jolt. Instead, there came the rains.

KAY CICELLIS

ELVIRA GORGORINI

The first downpour found Mrs. Gorgorini and her family in the tent. She woke up at night to the sound of rain, and fumbled in the dark at the heads of her two sons to see whether they were wet. All night long, her hands remained active, moving upwards and downwards, like anxious animals, searching for the first sign of dampness.

MARINO DEBONERA

When he woke up next morning, Marino Debonera had a moment of weakness. He saw his breath hanging in a small cloud of mist above his face. He felt the dampness weighing on his blankets. He saw sheets of water hanging across the flaps of his tent; and felt that he could not get up. He must keep to this small square spot of dryness, or else he would never be able to find it again. So he slept on, fitfully, for another half-hour. When he woke up again, he put his hand to his head and saw that his hair was damp. From that moment, the obsession of dampness began to grow in him. The dampness was invading the tent, steadily. It would get at him soon; one morning, he would wake up with mushrooms in his hair. The small square spot of dryness would have to be given up. He could see that the only hope of salvation lay in the warm body, his body. Here, in this tiny casket lived the precious seed, the spark that must never be allowed to go out.

All the following mornings, Marino leapt out of bed the moment he awoke, like a man pursued.

RUBINA BONANOU

The rain stopped at noon. Rubina Bonanou went out into the garden to the place she called her kitchen; two large stones against the wall, two bars of rusty iron placed across the stones to support the cooking-pan. Rubina tried to light a fire. It was useless; the wood was wet; all the wood, everywhere, was wet. The paper she used for kindling had gone soft. She thought of bringing out her wooden stool from the shed and using it for firewood. While she hesitated, it began to rain again. She went back to the shed. Later that afternoon, her son came home drenched, and found her sitting up in bed, a handkerchief tied round her head, vacantly eating a tomato.

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

NAPOLEON BOURDOUVANO

All morning, Napoleon Bourdouvano worked on the pier in the rain. They were loading black currants for Patras. When he had finished, he stood in the rain at a loss. He did not know where to go. The tents were wet; the sheds were wet. Nowhere in the whole wet world did there exist a set of dry clothes, a pair of dry shoes. He wondered how long it would take his clothes to dry on his body. They would probably cease dripping after the first day. Then would come the long period of evaporation, the clothes heavy and dank against the body, giving no warmth. Then there would be more rain; more laborious, ineffective drying. He gave up counting the days. He would never be really dry again.

ELVIRA GORGORINI

Mrs. Gorgorini moved back into her shed. She crept round the two wooden rooms, feeling for the draughts, looking for the treacherous holes between the planks. She discovered that the entire shed was occupied by a criss-cross of minute draughts. Wherever she sat, she was caught in them, as in a web.

When the wind arose, with thunder and lightning, she closed her eyes and leaned thankfully against the sheltering walls. The thin wood wavered under her weight; then she realised her illusion; these were not really walls; and she relinquished her feeling of security. At night, lying in bed, she forgot her mistake and stared confidently at the wall close to her face; until she saw there was a small slit in it, through which she suddenly found herself face to face, horribly close, with the wild night outside.

FATHER RUSSELLO

Father Russello went round the sheds of his parishioners and announced that the Army were distributing tar-paper to keep the rain out of the sheds. They must get tar-paper for protection; lose no time; pin tar-paper on the roofs, the walls, the floor.

ELVIRA GORGORINI

The lavatory problem became acute, especially at night. Mrs. Gorgorini had a problem to face.

As she no longer had porcelain chamber-pots for the night, she used a blue enamelled water-jug.

KAY CICELLIS

NAPOLEON BOURDOUVANO

People had to find new ways of guarding themselves against the damp. Napoleon kept his clothes under his mattress at night, so as to find them warm and dry in the morning.

RUBINA BONANOU

Whenever the rain stopped, Rubina Bonanou ran to her open-air kitchen and cooked some food, no matter what time of the day it was. Then she put the steaming dishes under her bed-clothes to keep them warm till it was time to eat. Her bed-clothes began to smell of grease. But she got used to it.

KITSO BATTISTATO

The roads were flooded. In his lonely walk along the pier waiting for passengers, Kitso Battistato tried to bridge the puddles he found on his way. Sometimes he used stones; or bits of plank. Another time he used a large rudder torn off a useless dinghy; and a rusty bedstead found in the ruins.

STORYTELLER

Those were the activities which followed the new calamity; the rains. A new effort of adaptation; a general testing, arranging, inventing; a new settling down. And then the work was done. There was nothing to do but wait. The children waited for the day they would go back to school. The older people waited for the knee-deep mud to dry around their sheds, so that they might venture outside again after the long confinement. The sick waited for ships from Patras. The masons of Epirus departed, promising to return in the spring. Lixouri waited, motionless, to be carried further into the heart of the winter, through the dark passage of the year.

And the beat of time grew slower, slower, slower.

(MUSIC)

ELVIRA GORGORINI

Mrs. Gorgorini is now in Lixouri. She has abandoned her shed in the country, because she cannot face the winter alone. Now she sits in

THE DEATH OF A TOWN

a room in the Paupers' Home which is used as a public barracks, looking out of the window, listening to the strange voices of her neighbours.

KITSO BATTISTATO

Kitso Battistato is sitting in his station wagon, staring at the sea through the rain-spattered wind-screen. He is expecting Paviello's boat from Argostoli. Perhaps it will bring him a few passengers. From time to time he switches on his engine to keep his feet warm.

RUBINA BONANOU

Rubina Bonanou is struck by a brilliant idea. She goes up to her table, tears off the Christmas paper that covered it, and stuffs it in the chinks of the door. Then she goes back to bed.

NAPOLEON BOURDOUVANO

Napoleon Bourdouvano is sitting at a table in the taverna called « The Resurrection. » He is playing a game of backgammon with Theagenes, the proprietor. They are both silent. Methodical raindrops patter loudly on the tar-paper roof.

MARINO DEBONERA

Marino Debonera is in his shed. He is writing a letter to friends who used to live in Lixouri. From time to time he stares fixedly at the giant wild artichoke which has sprouted through the floor.

FATHER RUSSELLO

Father Russello has gone back to his old hobby: repairing watches. It has become impossible to do outdoor work. He sits at a green metal garden-table in his shed; three open watches lie before him. He examines the little wheels attentively, but does not even glance at the face of the watch to see whether it is fast or slow.

KAY CICELLIS

STORYTELLER

Time has stopped again. It is no longer this morning, but any morning. The picture is still, as before; fixed and clear. In the foreground, the sea. In the middle, heaps of rust-coloured ruins. Here and there, mud-coloured tents and little square houses of paper and wood. And in the background, the exposed landscape.

It is all quite flat; and fixed. A picture of destruction; a picture of still winter; of waiting. Yet in spite of all, the picture of a town. Therefore I shall not frame it yet.

(MUSIC)

ROBERT HORAN

THE RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX

I

*At the paws of the immaculate and ruined lion
coils the serpent sand, blows the blond dust.
All the rubied furnaces of history
have burned this world down to its childhood memory,
pomegranate-hearted Egypt, lifting its azured head,
until it exists alone in its zone of Zion.*

*Down in the tombs of gilt and must,
trinkets in brass sprinkle the linen mummies;
and the royal, sculptured bed
crumbles at the merest touch of the explorer's rust.
Little jugs of lapis, lyres, coins,
calm tablets have survived the hurricanes.*

*The Sphinx, a singular medallion,
a tomb at evening, a field where nothing is watered,
and nothing in time is altered
but the imperceptible erasures of the wind.
A perfect meditation, requiring no nourishment
other than itself. A fact, like a rose.*

*What infinite horizon are you watching, shipless, starless,
that you do not wander; holding, like an unborn child*

*the secret of silence into the millenia?
 Between your curled and careless paws,
 Cleopatra sat, tapping the sand with a lily,
 and her face shone in the wrinkled shield of Caesar.
 Were there vultures nesting in your impassive forehead
 on those antique evenings, as they dropped the hours
 grain after grain between their fingers,
 lost on the silent reach of the shell-less beaches?*

*So an ultimate and wordless riddle
 crowned my wayward journey to this monument.
 The whole ruined and unrigged ship arose before me,
 a superb, unfathomed signal and statue of serenity,
 its vast enigma breasting the Sahara.*

II

*On every side, gold acres of the desert,
 soft hills of heavy sand, sun-blistered as honey;
 some chalk-colored; some dust of skeletons;
 some grey as doves, or tawny as hides of tigers;
 some shining like ground glass in the sprinkled light.
 And in the hollows, the moody blues and sables
 and starless slates. The whole miraculous meadow
 ground down from mountains, humbled from other
 heroic efforts toward articulation,
 here, in the eternal gaze of noon,
 surrendered to the community of grains.
 The hands of Arabs and the hooves of camels,
 the surf of the Himalaya and the minerals of heaven,
 all laid blossomless in one whispering ocean of ocher.*

*So did this crystal center of a continent
 achieve its immortality, level before the furnaces and the
 furies,
 its immense plateau of faded and unflowered ruins*

*as faceless as the sea, swallowing our footprints
in its sifting and shifting carpet of velvet.*

*Beneath the calm and changeless gaze of the Sphinx,
it lies in a pure period of lapsed time,
reducing more recent riddles to ashes.*

*The grave lion-woman who in Greece wore wings,
this serene and sober idol, sparsely neighbored by tombs;
isosceles statements against the bare horizon,
stripped of their marble, roughened by rainless wind,
unfigured as the sand, though holding the handful-bones
and testaments of empires, and rigid kings.*

*It is a scene infernal in its power,
the scope of its puzzle, the burden of its history.
Its architecture, though partly human, has escaped
the hands of its creators and defied their children;
as the beautiful and baffled smile of the Gioconda,
has entered the dreams of the traveler like a clue to heaven.*

*Androgynous, maternal, quixotic as the unicorn,
incestuous and multi-sexual; a mating of the fierce king-beast
with an angelic nature, its name is legion,
and stirs in the penumbral mind anarchic memory,
the first face that smiled
and leavened the darkness of the child.*

*To this ship, freighted with the bronze Egyptian stars
above each shoulder, I stood chained.
In the hushed, dragonfly-tinted twilight,
as the world was deftly drained of its daytime, humdrum
scarlet,
and the ravens on their wings of ragged obsidian
climbed the final ladders, I stood swarmed.
The swollen, muffled dusk doubled the gloom of the world.*

*And as the enigma retreated into shadow,
I saw whatever riddle the imperial frown proposed
was multiple, and mine, and endless,
and in my hands, and in my turning heart,
and in my hope and fever and desire,
and in the fabric of the air and light;
and every second of my journey's arc
proposed its conflict and pronounced its claim.*

*And if the search is for a sense of being,
to furnish the nightmare darkness with a name,
this monument, now blotted in rich shadow,
was subtle with the symbol of its form.*

III

*That peace I strove for in the feathered dusk,
when the lemon-colored world enters the lunar moment,
merely appeared as fixed and unchanging as a star.
Even at its center it was seeded with complexity,
no more simple than sin, symbolized in the apple,
no more simple than sorrow with its enigmatic shawls.
As I discovered, late, in a carmined corner of sunset,
drunken, half-blinded with desert lights and mirages of foun-
tains,
the doubled face of love, the Sphinx uttering nothing
but Being to the uttermost, rainless, undappled horizon.
And guessed, at that moment, what I had feared in the fooled
years,
that my heart, held cold as a bud in a clenched and childish
hand,
would escape beyond my mind's or my tongue's power,
shouting down all the august avenues of wind,
even to alien and peopled shores and more native places,
in the stained hallways of houses and in the ears of strangers:
'Without love we are locked in a prison of paper;*

*puppets ringing the foolish bells of tin,
 ringing the painted saints home to their supper of straw.
 Now, as each day is done, and at the lip of death;
 as we stare savagely across the wasted years,
 crippled with the ornaments of forgotten gaieties,
 flows, from our eyes, to water and bless this desert,
 a new and innocent fountain; flow the tears, not of regret,
 but of Being; until, at the leonine and porous foot,
 under the arid shadow of the immobile monument,
 burns the bright-berried thorn bush, the blood's emblem,
 the heart-colored emblem of all supplication!*

IV

MONOLOGUE OF THE SPHINX

*'It is simplicity itself to formulate an answer
 and then construct a riddle to which it will apply.
 Behind the riddle which I proposed to Oedipus
 was yet another, to which I did not have the answer.
 It continues. I am studying it.
 I have not yet formulated the entire question.
 It is this which is inscrutable.
 You find it reflected in what you have called serenity.
 For our purposes we may consider it eternal,
 and it is this knowledge which you have defined as peace.
 As you can see, looking around you, the question continues.
 Many have claimed, almost upon arrival, to have the answer.
 The greater the façade of assurance, the more vulnerable
 the interior. Some people are removed from temptation
 by stupidity, others by design, some by will, a few by ac-
 cident.
 Most rigorous marbles can float for an instant on water,
 and time is water. Others say they have inherited an answer.
 Some say they have discovered it in a book.
 Others have not even heard the question, and continue*

*making bread, or weaving until the last shutter of the light.
Some few are attentive, and wait, listening at the gate.*

*The saints seek another solution and a second world,
endure their privations and engage their thorns.*

It is pointless here to recommend:

we can only observe the search for purity in pain.

Martyrdom, when it is an occasion of the will,

is a unique and private measure,

no more susceptible to emulation than it is to pity.

It may be the subject of adoration or wonder,

a guessed-at perfection motiveless in God,

involving complex matings of pride and abnegation,

ambition and penance; the sin sought but not committed,

committed but not named; vision and illusion, grace or madness.

*The point at which ecstasy touches or departs
from reality is beyond our jurisdiction.*

Like claims of perfection or evil, epileptic visions,

*Karma, and the replies of death, our acquiescence is too late,
extraneous to the event. Witness is not all.*

Belief is another matter. Faith is another matter.

*They may even precede the event. They do not depend
upon the world, nor from it. Our sympathy or contempt
may canonize or stone, but that which claims to have escaped
the tyranny of mortality is no longer within the language.*

It is an issue of angels in an orchard.

It is our own ambitions toward this end we bless or curse.

It is not that I ask for caution, or reason, or reserve.

I ask for nothing. It is you who ask.

You have not even imagined my question.

Somewhere, in this kingdom, love enters and leaves.

This is as significant as anything you may ever touch.

*Though our claims are grandiose, and many link themselves
to a hundred heavens, the rest is prose, a grey puzzle.*

You return each evening to the wasted fire,
 small in the humanity of your desire.
 Among the faltered stars that somewhere shine,
 may pass incomparable miracles.
 And in nearer places, translations of the soul
 to outer spaces, accomplishments of the divine.
 But innocence is less provable than guilt,
 and patience should humble the entire court.
 We speak only for ourselves, which bears repetition.
 The mantis climbs the never-ending vine,
 pausing in simulated attitudes of prayer,
 erect in the evening air,
 and I mark how his world is much like mine.

Be prodigal, not as a king ransoming the cripple
 with his pennies, but as a gardener
 among his velvet crowns. All beauties have a generous
 structure, no matter how obscure their inmost feature.
 Though the foolish disclaim multiplicity,
 they would be freer could they see how much
 of hatred may surround their love.
 This is not a fatal opposition.
 We must embrace the paradox. Nothing is canceled out.
 It is merely that the proportion of gold
 is less in nature than that of iron.

We spoke of the gardener, assisting creation,
 witness, expediter, servant.
 Observe him in pasture.
 Under his dark hand are the possible Aprils,
 honies to fill the freckled flower.
 In this slant of light he appears mortal
 and human and humane. As he may be.
 He has relation.
 And yet my own pasture is flowerless.
 Though you have avoided me through countless midnights,

*all enigmas have their final hours.
 The encounter, avoided, multiplies its occasions.
 Though this be a desert, remember me in the gardener.'*

V

*So the encounter, avoided, multiplies its occasions,
 and like the Sphinx, oracular and ageless,
 hangs its ornaments in crevices of sleep;
 and in its storied house has many mansions,
 and in its mirrors many faces keeps;
 and rises when we rise, and in our eyes
 kindles the fire of continual surprise.*

*From the cocoon of sleep, the eternal chrysalis
 emerges, furred, terrible, radiant,
 rampant in its rainbows of dust.
 Spoked with sun, the room of recognition
 is furnished forthwith! Every nail shines;
 the spider hung ecstatic on his thread,
 framed in the burst of light; the mouse in his corner,
 the ravaged book, the widowed flower,
 the carpet lions and the porcelain horses
 all are gilded with participation, are witnesses!*

*Those mornings, those meetings, those mixtures
 of our breath gone signless into books of amethyst,
 confront us now again, bend toward us
 their resurrected light, their possibility.
 The objects glow, hung on memory's branches:
 the steel-eyed bird stepping among the berries;
 the mildewed book under the hammock;
 the headless statue among the wisteria.
 Objects, teaching us nothing,
 showing us nothing but their perfected selves.*

THE RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX

*The seeded pomegranate, a perpetual enigma;
histories of hives, simplicity of daisies,
the circus stars and moons of pewter
revolve the rainbowed calendar, and teach us nothing.
No more than the mute sheep in the draughty shadows,
but patience and the variety of effort.
No more than the amber prison where lies locked
an insect older than Egypt, as antique as a planet;
broken forth, is a handful of bronze dust.*

*Though each life is in itself a sign, pointing onward,
in the expanding meadow of the flowered sea;
each is a shell, with its historical voices,
bruised with the memory of other beaches;
each is a time, a world, a blossom,
the solid breath of effort, whose earliest layer
is not life, but death.*

*They teach us nothing, unless it be
how all things, in their empty throne
of perfection, demand fulfillment.
That they live when we receive them;
that they flower at the end of our hands;
that they take light when lifted into our vision,
and feed our memories with grains of diamond.*

*They teach us nothing, until we loop them over
with our utmost gesture of rapt devotion.
Absorbing them, standing on the brink of a morning,
cold, clamorous with light, we give them back;
in the lilac waste of evening, in the expired breath,
refurnish the world.*

*And then the heart's extra jump,
finding this pasture like a ramp to heaven,
is the very crown, thorned as it is with thought,
of our humble avocation.*

VI

*Though it seem soon, too soon, too great with sun
to mention this last room, how soon, how soon will come,
how imperceptibly, a little at a time
the fringes and the edges of our death.
The poppy-colored noon is now a name,
and all the banners of the bright day's breath
are scattered, and the nibbling mice
fret the sick silence of promised paradise.
Now the head leans forward toward the rustling dead,
and all shall ride the horseless chariot of the iron bed.
Steadily, stonily, tapping each liliated bone,
death, bodiless and insomniac and alone.*

*So we are borne away to horizons of marble,
that angled west where the world is ashes,
and there is neither talk nor trouble,
and the paragon stars assume their places.
To this vast and luminous puzzle
we surrender the faded and the final pieces.
Lest this seem zero or mere alabaster,
mute monoliths of the hunched and staring dead
doomed to outlive their own disaster,
regard, instead, their actions like the light that fed
the dazzling horn of the lily or the goldenrod.
They shine in the ebony tunnels of memory;
in several minds their hearts are still garnet,
bright-minted as that graceful Grecian money
the sea-floor washes toward our century's summit,
revealing a world of empresses and slaves,
profiles of splendor, Gods among their doves.*

*Though this city seems so little sainted,
so wracked and ribbed with steel and avarice;
the children sour in the shadows, and the past
lamented in all the museums of pomp and circumstance;*

THE RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX

*though the dogs wander in the gardenless mornings,
and the trains rattle and jog their dumb freight
to ceremonies without innocence and hours without endings,
and there is a last and a locked gate;
though any sunrise will shake its pale light
on the old men, creased and cold in the doorways,
and the surrendered summer wrap in night
all manner of partial deaths and doomed castaways;
nevertheless, at every intersection,
even among the metallic fields and meadows of windows,
some ambition of love has been crowned with action,
some gold has stormed forward out of the tortured shadows.*

*In the mute center of every midnight,
as the world rushes its rows of houses
over the rim and toward the fences of the light,
someone is brought into this circle of Being,
turns in the dark where the lover lies
in the moon's lavender; and for nothing, for no reward,
not for yesterday nor for tomorrow, nor out of pity,
offers the immense, featureless gift of love.*

VII

*There is an hour when the mowers stop,
when cliffs and clouds float in their fields
of utmost April and rhyme of time.
There is an hour when the singers hop
to the last leaftop, and the dumb and blind
await the second coming of the world.
There is an hour when the heart hopes
that all the seas will linger in their shells;
when the noon has surfeited the crops,
and ghosts of thunder gather in the hills.
There is an hour when we wish the world,
shuddered in its veils of milky motion,*

*would hang like a kite, like a cloud uncurled
float in the sculpture of the tortured ocean.
There is an hour that represents the sum
of all our effort, bodied into love;
as in a cove, we find that we have come
to the gold exit of a childhood cave.
There is no peace that passeth understanding
but has its secret in a sense of being.
Though some Sahara hours are globed in gloom,
and Golgotha's enormous afternoon
shows us a livid sky and a moon turning,
yet lamps and lanterns of the west will bloom;
and, hung within the soon-seraphic dome,
shall burn the name of the enameled morning.*

CONRAD AIKEN

THE WALK IN THE GARDEN

I

*Noting in slow sequence by waterclock of rain
or dandelion clock of sun
the green hours of trees and white hours of flowers:
annotating again the « flower-glory of the season,
a book that is never done, » never done:
savoring phrases of green-white, mock-white,
while the ancient lyre-tree, the ancient plum,
adds for another May its solar sum
in silent galaxies of bloom:
it is here, interpreting these, translating these,
stopping in the morning to study these,
touching affectionately the cold bark
of the seven-branched tree, where bees
stir the stars and scatter them down:
it is here, in these whitenesses of thought,
poring over these pages of white thought,
that we ponder anew the lifelong miracle:
the miracle that in these we best remember,
and in wisdom treasure best,
the lost snows of another December,
and the lost heart, and the lost love.
What matter that we are older, that we age?*

*Blest that we live this morning, blest
that still we read the immortal book
and in time's sunlight turn another page.*

II

*Shall we call it, then, the walk in the garden?
the morning walk in the simple garden? But only if by this
we mean*

*everything! The vast daybreak ascends the stairs of pale silver
above a murmur of acacias, the white crowns
shake dark and bright against that swift escalation of light,
and then, in intricate succession, the unfolding minutes and
hours*

*are marked off by the slow and secret transactions
of ant and grassblade, mole and tree-root,
the shivering cascade of the cicada's downward cry, the
visitation*

*(when the brazen noon invites) of that lightninged prism
the hummingbird, or the motionless hawkmoth.*

*Listen! The waterclock of sap in bough and bole,
in bud and twig, even in the dying
branch of the ancient plum-tree, this you hear, and clearly,
at eleven, or three, as the rusted rose-petal
drops softly, being bidden to do so, at the foot of the stem,
past the toad's unwinking eye! Call it
the voyage in the garden, too, for so it is:
the long voyage home, past cape and headland
of the forgotten or remembered: the mystic signal
is barely guessed in the spiderwort's golden eye, recognized
tardily, obscurely, in the quick bronze flash
from the little raindrop left to wither
in the hollow of a dead leaf, or a green fork
of celandine. For in this walk, this voyage,
it is yourself, the profound history of your « self, »
that now as always you encounter. At eleven or three*

it was past these folded capes and headlands, these decisions
 or refusals,
 these little loves, or great,
 that you once came. Did you love? did you hate?
 did you murder, or refrain from murder, on an afternoon
 of innocent cirrus in April? It is all recorded
 (and with it man's history also)
 in the garden syllables of dust and dew:
 the crucifixions and betrayals,
 the lying affirmations and conniving denials,
 the cowardly assumptions, when you dared not face yourself,
 the little deaths, and the great. Today
 among these voluntary resumptions you walk a little way
 toward tomorrow. What, then, will you choose to love or
 hate?
 These leaves, these ants, these dews, these steadfast trifles,
 dictate
 whether that further walk be little or great.
 These waiting histories will have their say.

III

But of those other trifles, the too intrusive,
 the factual, the actual, that are too intrusive,
 too near, too close, too gross, for deeper meaning:
 what of these, what will memory make of these?
 Will these too yield in time to the magic of translation?
 The bobby pins, the daily news, the paper clips, even
 the stuffed two-headed calf once seen in a pawnshop window;
 as indeed also the crumpled letter, furtively
 dropped in the ash can at the corner,
 yes, and the torn half of the movie ticket, bright pink,
 found inadvertently in the breast pocket, to remind you —
 but meanly — of other days of afternoon rain:
 how will you profitably rehearse these,

*how will you (otherwise than here!) rehearse these, and to
what end*

*of reconstruction? for what inspired reinterpretation
of the lost image, the lost touch?*

*Useless, here, the immediate, the factual, the actual:
the telephone remains silent when most you wish to hear
it:*

*the May morning, or is it August or September,
remains empty, infertile, at precisely that instant
when your heart — if that is what you mean by heart —
would invoke a vision.*

*Blessing enough, indeed, it might have
been,*

*but not under peach-tree or lyre-tree,
in the persistence of the radio's tremolo
and the listening silence of an empty room:
blessing enough if in these should quietly have spoken,
in answer to that invocation, the not-voice of voice,
the now almost unknown and unfamiliar voice,
the voice at first not recognized when heard:
blessing enough if in these
indifferent accidents and meaningless impromptus
the angelic not-you should open the door
and angelically enter, to take slow possession
of the room, the chairs, the walls, the windows,
the open piano with its waiting keys,
and the poor bed under the forgotten picture,
but possessing also
the divine touch that in the radiant fingertips
could at once create, with a magician's eloquence,
nothing from something, or something from nothing:
as, out of the untouched piano,
a shabby chord, a threadbare tune, the banal air
squealing from the midnight jukebox, where,
at the corner saloon, over the tepid beer,
you sit and stare,*

remembering how the days have become years,
 and the minutes hours,
 and the false sunlight is distilled to tears
 in the sentimental involutions of a shared sound:
 yes, and the touch of the fingertip, once, on the back of the
 hand,
 or, for a braver instant, tentatively, along the line of the
 cheek:
 but no, these are all a broken imagination only,
 the one and only heart remains lonely,
 the morning remains silent, cannot speak,
 muted by the ridiculous trifles, the preposterous trifles,
 that stammer between the past and you.
 Only, in the thinking hands, for a moment,
 the persistent stupid bloodstream vaguely traces —
 as if on air, as if on air —
 the lost touch, the lost image, the chimerical future:
 praying, now, for the illusion of an abstract love.

IV

The illusion of an abstract love? Say, rather,
 it was the loves and hates that were illusion,
 and all that accompanied them: items of fatigue
 or of dubious regret, denials and acceptances,
 these it is that are as clouds
 gone deathward over the morning, lost, dislimned,
 and now recoverable only, if at all,
 in the remembered crevice in the remembered garden wall:
 abstracted out of space, abstracted out of time,
 but now reset, by the morning walk in the garden,
 in crystal rhyme.
 In these rich leaves, which are not only leaves
 of lyre-tree or pomecitron, but also leaves
 of a living book that is never done:
 from winter to summer, from spring to fall:

in these we keep them all.

*Here is that abstract love which we would find
wherein all things become imperishable mind:
the numberless becomes one, the brief becomes everlasting,
the everlasting opens to close
in the perishing of the raindrop on the rose:
violence is understood, and at last still,
evil is fixed and quiet as a tree or hill,
but all alike acceptable and one
and in one pattern made to move, or not to move,
by the illusion, if it is illusion,
of an abstract love.*

*Touch now again the serpent skin of the lyre-tree:
stoop now again, a hummingbird,
to the magic of the mock-orange:
count again by waterclock of rain
or dandelion clock of sun
the slow days of trees, the quick hours of flowers:
this time, this matin-song, this love, is yours, is ours,
a book that is never done, never done.*

JULIA RANDALL

COCKLE SHELLS

*These fluted bones project
their element, as if one still might press
to Toltec motion, this mauve ridge,
this saffron; if this polar figuration
might lax, run, and the hand
that held it, chipping hard, the arm,
submerge Tyrrhenian.*

*As if their days
drew, in deep weather, correspondences
subtler than substance: flux
on the stiff back; in the opaque
paired chambers, painting light;
in the still wall
the wave's reach, soft in spending and renewal.*

*How we in air
comport, resemble — whose are eyes to tell
the surface contact and the printing pressure,
or what is vaporous and what is real?*

*Exterior, we compete
with the wind's rage, contrive
superior grains to rock, contage*

*the light with longing; our bloods beat
excessive; we parade
as agonists abroad.*

*Inly, where move
the making marrows, out of light, in durance,
the frame resistant not of will but cell
compacted against cell, least-breathing, suffers
what metaphors of ether? Might motes express
hollows, hues, torsions, processes, in stuff
ivory-dense?*

*As if, the opposed flesh cast, and stiff upon
some rim of sand this base bleached, one might trace
claims, concords; one might hear,
subtler than speech, the tongue in the bone declare
its element, sound its slow release in air.*

SUNDAY MORNING

*How if with birds and bells my tongue could break
your surfaces, should I redeem my night!
unspeak with noise the too articulate
for loving words —*

*Familial Sunday's weight
how silently, instead, refines the pitch:
music flows now, inexorably, to speech.*

*It was this simply: in the pride of the mind,
in private luck, the carelessness to wound;
the will to publish every name of defeat
to strangers; the compulsion to be right.*

*Sometimes I think of cheated Lear, or that
relic that blessed Colonus; then I assume
a sabbath resolution, after the storm.*

*Oh are our hands and intermittent eyes
absented by design, or debile feres
that serve a grosser master? I had thought
love looked out steadily, and moved her cares
close to confusion, safe in costliest wars.*

*Sunday is well to sharpen me: I say
if rain by evening come to succour me,
I know the wounds, who struck them, who did pay.*

FINALE

*Repassed the seaways, found the promontory
with ghosts of trees familiar. Now by day
the seafaced boy stares me: whose are eyes
to build old life? Empty, empty the skies,
and waters empty as air.*

*My rock bed
reddens; all my wounds are real, got
early or late, deepen to death. And which
center me in the reckoning?*

*Come, sweet, come
my final fluting nightmare, gloom me home.*

WHEN MY LOVE

*When my love cries
in the wombing night
a pity of love
mothers my eyes
muscles my hand
alive, to fend
ghosts of his blood.*

*Ah, merely wed!
 dawn's cold, noon's shock
 submit, but this
 is no nerve's lease,
 no prayer's power
 at the dreamed door:
 no wile, no feat
 to crack the light
 on fearing dark.*

*What can vows bind?
 an instant face
 to a trait of wind.
 Beauty so bared,
 seeming discrete —
 an ocean chance,
 a solstice look —
 perjurers, we
 presume to dower.*

*Health, pestilence,
 hope, treasure, want,
 how shall these wive,
 ringed ancient,
 singled in troth
 to the one house?*

*Raw, published, holy,
 asleep, abroad
 we gouge Time's bed.*

AFTER LONG SILENCE

Bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young
We loved each other and were ignorant.
YEATS

*Not ignorant, Yeats, but laced to bone
so tight, so nighted in that room
where failure makes the lover dumb
to inmate spasms — young, we curse
that even a stranger without song
can go befriended from that house
whose healing is our only voice.*

*You, in your looser dark, can tell,
perhaps, who knew as hard a soil,
whether we break; if strength or art
prevail before another night.*

*Say, shall the body give us grace
when her poor constancy has come
to love in a more liberal space,
break bread, and speak, mate heart and tongue,
and human wisdom be born?*

DE NATURA BONI

*So sure, old saints, that being herb,
eye, diamond, grants
a native excellence,
not we, less thorough.
Split spheres do not compose
a universe of praise.*

*Content
is emphasis.
Record this hymn*

*from spare throats:
 coasts first seen
 in the rinsed dawn, days attended, no gaze bent
 lifetimes, no landfires' fierce
 havoc shall gaunt;
 nor cloud the ribbon of his covenant
 when love rose
 over a rain of years.*

SEQUENCE FOR ODILON REDON

*L'imagination est la reine des facultés.
 BAUDELAIRE*

*The tree of the demonic lithographer
 gapes in a childish forest where
 evil, never mechanical, may start
 hawk-eyed from hollow bole,
 or gray boughs curl
 and claw, grim foliage sprout and wing
 on stormy projects, nightmare shows fill each
 embrasure where the innocent surface breaks.*

*« One must respect
 black, » the mind's color, and uncluttered pall
 that guards stiff-angled souvenirs of all
 shades and contortions. Party afternoons
 when the coffee-table cosmos bloomed and died
 in velvet. Cry remembrance for a fee:
 three walnuts and a thimble! Ah, but there
 where the shoehorn glistened, and the glass decanter
 cast ruby light on Twenty Thousand Leagues
 Under the Sea, spread open, and supporting —
 what was it? pennies? sunken... Ah there, there
 Atlantis rises, bell tower in bright air,
 roof ridge, begotten.*

P O E M S

So your screen surprises
a graphic world of wonders: the bouquet
states heads. The demon of unspeaking spaces
never afflicts. Engenderer, you call
his brother by the rites of our eyes, and we
start at your lore of us, spiralling from a fragment
in tusche with highlights. Are we Anthony?
That butterfly is real as the wind's changes;
black speaks the life of trees as to an ear,
and the balloon eye, fantastic penetrant,
mounts toward infinity, whose light is sure.

ALBERT HERZING

NIGHT LETTER

I

*On a street of haunted snow, the lights turn on
For another night of dreaming, and the dark
Slips over buildings like a cooling cowl
(God's will be done tonight, I think,*

*(Though of course it is never done) and lights extinguish
In certain lodgings more felicitous
Than ours of course are (but do not complain!),
Where men their hands abandon, so to set sail...*

II

*Their maritime serenity descends
In lapse of waters after weary toil —
(As cry of harbor in the nightfall fog
That serves as day's unutterable ending).*

*Descending dusky beds and under weigh,
Beneath warm-sheeted ceilings, vague as clouds
Their gallant galleons go — uncertain sailing
On an ancient but a storm-begetting ocean.*

III

*So the body known by daylight bestial,
Gross and ungracious, in night's philtre is
How golden a transit from their seedy day.
Now young, light-hearted masters of the spray,*

*Their limbs in jackets like the primal seeds
Shift in their sea beds, spiralling like lines
That swaying masts print in imagined air —
That Pythagoras would harness to a star.*

IV

*So some, most fortunate, may believe their voyage
But a summer's cruise and holiday from the day,
That ocean but a pond where, blithe as yachts,
Their keels bevel the breezy, insouciant waves.*

*On their crystalline Aegeans, where but few
May sail, we all could wish to sail at times —
Serene as stones, we'd loll on sunny decks
On those precious seas phlegmatic as old heirlooms —*

V

*Though the most are luckless, and their voyage
An unfortunately sinister disaster
Over arctic oceans through glacial squalls
Where sleet walks on the water and Ships of Doom*

*Deliver them to a terror's ancient image:
It is the 'Boss,' or the groaning, criminal dead
Whom we all wake up to when we wake and drown
In stiff pajamas freezing with glacial sweat,*

VI

*This still submerging night — with sweeping wind
 Across a plain of wares, and dashing sweep
 Of waves across a plain of sweeping spray —
 And winter rains, eternally drizzling down*

*On the seesaw of the sea and waves' upheaval
 And contrapuntal slap of waves on hulls
 As thin as eggshells — antipodal sharp slap
 Of choppy whitecaps, — and the timber's creak —*

VII

*— And the divisions of the darkness, — and the dawn
 Hisses like lava down the hazy hills
 To all who sail on sufferance of their watches —
 Comber still mounting comber like a range —*

*And still the totem sea, and the archaic
 Dim agony of setting forth, to the flow
 And flux, destruction, resurrection there,
 Losses and reclamations of the living*

VIII

*Whose divisions never end with ending night:
 Another sea replaces, and the dark remains.
 And quiet as criminals, men who will work
 Awaken softly in grim and ascetic rooms.*

*So, also bound, subdued with ending darkness,
 Somewhere a tiring hound spits out its whining,
 Somewhere a rooster, and the hazy sun
 Tumbles like lava down the eastern road.*

IX

*Streets rise up hissing with the tread of traffick, —
Sharp sneezing of a motor like a gun:
And, like a gun, the metal of this dawn...
As rising mariners awake, I cry*

*'We shall not cease from travel till the tide
Sways us to harbor in that rooted place
That makes and end of travel and men's toil
And barques us on the shoals of paradise.'*

WHISTLING

*Sudden the bouncing on some bounding days
In spring: and a young man's rapidly turning
A fresh-green corner from an alley of brick
— How he will whistle, pivot with a stick
To counterpoint from palings his simpleton's patter
Of notes — where neither piston nor horn could shatter
Such suburb-peaceful atmosphere, and bear
Such ramified chaos through its furious air —*

*Being exuberance's fond fool, the sheer
Undoubted goodness of his bustle through days
Has set him whistling, who can truly praise
His sweetie's sex and twit a street to its death
In artless noise — so boyish over lathe
Lithe factory-workers whistle through a rain
Of gongs, blasts, whistles, although Time's in them
Whose quieter undersong shall trap their hours...*

*So the world's our bird cage, where we whistle together:
And when it's evening, and the streets are dark,
Small boys assert their whistles through the park
Like birds, and pry up horror: The berserk*

*Lolloping monster slavers a weak whistle
Of sexual fear, while roaring over trestle
Some train hurls silence from the bumptious air,
And, passing by, wills richer silence there.*

*Our goings and comings announce a similar silence
Sandwiched with whistles as we munch on winds:
Unfriendly sunshine, and the hooters blowing
Where but from love? and when all's said and done
What had we shaped to have love's staying?
... Now whistle darkly, birds! the day sinks down
To deeper silence in those final skies
Where the very old, so sadly wise, don't whistle!*

DAVID STUART

BIRD MAN

« Listen! » Becker said. « I'll guarantee he'll show up this spring, just like the rest of the birds. »

« Here we go again! » Moreau said, shrugging his shoulders.

At the time four of us were sitting in the Café des Deux Magots, and Becker had finally switched the conversation onto his favorite topic — the Bird Man. I was the only one who had yet to see the fabulous creature, so Becker's performance was chiefly for my benefit. And what a performance! Not that the other two, Moreau and Augier, were any less insistent about the Bird Man's existence, they were just less theatrical. Becker punctuated his tale by cocking his head, hopping about the café — even climbing over the tables, if not prevented, and blasting out shrill rooklike caws. After each blast we'd see at least one café-sitter pick himself off the floor. It was ear-splitting entertainment, no mistake about that.

Then when we'd leave the café Becker would trot me across the street and into the St.-Germain-des-Prés churchyard to point out the spot where the Bird Man was to appear. Now the yard was grim and bleak, the wooden benches colder than pump handles, and the trees bare. « But spring, » Becker would insist, « is only three months off. »

Once a day for those three months I heard the tale of the Bird Man. Each time it was embroidered a bit more, but

with each hearing I believed a bit more. The idea of a man's insanity taking the harmless twist of making him a bird fascinated me. So when at last the cold let up I commenced spending most of my time hanging around the churchyard. Becker was busy painting, getting ready a spring show. Even so, he managed to drop by several times a week to make sure my interest didn't flag.

« Don't be impatient, » Becker said. « He'll come on, brother, like the apocryphal roc! »

And one day he did.

I was alone in the yard, scratching some notes on the back of an envelope, when suddenly I heard a loud chirping. I looked up to see the Bird Man hopping along Rue de l'Abbaye, coming for the churchyard. He hopped through the gate and on to the far end of the yard where he continued his chirping. And almost at once the air was filled with birds — thousands of them. They settled around him. They covered the ground like a patchwork quilt. It looked as if every bird in Paris turned out for his welcome.

He was a tall, gaunt man, with piercing blue-black eyes that darted about like gnats around a rotting pear. The pupils were tremendous and looked artificially dilated. A knife-edge aquiline nose hooked over his thin, too-red lips: they were constantly pursed as he never stopped chirping. His fingers were long and brittle and the few nails not broken off short were cardboard thick and yellow. Over his thin shoulders he wore a cape of *mousseline* into which were woven feathers of a hundred different species of birds. Dirty chicken feathers were set beside fine ostrich plumes, duck beside egret, sparrow beside oriole, until the whole was a haphazard arrangement of colors and sizes. From his feather-covered, short, cotton pants shot a pair of bony, knotty-kneed, hairy legs. And around his ankles and covering his otherwise bare feet dangled rings of feathers like those worn in certain native dances. This costume was topped with a tuft of quetzal tail feathers thrust into his shaggy matted black hair.

Crouched down, sort of sitting on his heels, and with the

feathered cape covering him, he really looked like a monstrous bird — like something out of Chagall via Roquefort. And the amazing thing was that the birds accepted him. He moved among them chirping and clucking. He was one of them. I know that I had only to lift my arm to send them all into the air.

« How about the phoenix! » Becker called to me. He was coming full tilt across the street carrying a loaf of bread in each hand. « He's the eagle! The king of birds! »

« He's that, » I agreed. I took one of the loaves and we set to work tearing them into crumbs. « He's lost his marbles, too. »

« Insane? He's the *only* sane thing in the world! »

There couldn't have been more than a split second between Becker's shout and the Bird Man's leap. He went high into the air, his cape spread like wings across his arms. And the birds rose with him and fluttered overhead until in some mysterious manner he signaled that danger had passed, when they returned to his feet.

« God... » Becker breathed ecstatically.

By now the churchyard was filled with spectators. A good hundred more were hanging on the surrounding iron fence. This group kept changing as the big green busses stopped at the corner to take some away and leave a new lot. A number of cars had lined up along the curb, the people standing on the fenders and engine hoods the better to see. Augier and Moreau elbowed their way through this crowd and stood beside us.

« You ought to stuff him and stick him in the next surrealist show, » Augier said.

« Bag your lip! » Becker cracked. He placed the last crumb of his loaf in the middle of his palm and held it toward the Bird Man. « Here, birdie, birdie, birdie, » he called softly.

Augier let out a howl you could hear 20 kilometers up the Seine. « Birdie, birdie! Holy Christ! You're both lunatics! »

The Bird Man cocked his head at us. Then he threw

out his arms and flapped his feathered cape, and the bird went into the air with a great sound like the beating of waves on rocks. With a final glance at us he climbed onto the fence, dropped to the sidewalk, and hopped off down the street. He was out of sight in a very few seconds.

« You big-lip! » Becker yelled. « You've scared him off you and your goddamn laughter! »

Becker was sore, like a Breton would be if you stood off and heaved rocks at his calvary. Becker actually held birds in high awe, subscribing to all the mystical flapdoodle about them. In his paintings the *Good in Man* is represented by bird forms: he paints birds in battle, birds attacking, and beating the hell out of men, amorous birds, and birds of God. For all that, he wasn't sore very long. When we left the yard he was off on a harangue about how the earth evolved out of the mundane egg.

In the next two months I saw quite a bit of the Bird Man. As the days grew warmer he came more often to the churchyard until by the end of June he was doing three shows a week. Moreau's and Augier's interests fell off early. But Becker was with me whenever he could take an afternoon off from his painting. It wasn't long before the Bird Man recognized me. He'd hop up and sort of squat at my feet cocking his head and looking at me with one bright eye as he snapped up the crumbs I held on my palm. Actually he liked me better than he did Becker. Becker was overboard in his sympathy. He bent backwards too far trying to make him a friend. The Bird Man would suffer it just so long then hop away to his feathered pals. Personally, I preferred him to stand a bit off: he smelled pretty sour, like the bottom of a bird cage.

As far as I could tell he spoke no language, unless you can call clucks, chirps, quacks, and gobbles a language. I tried him with the several languages I know, and even read him a chapter from the Koran in the original. For this last effort he gave me a couple of bird whistles. Finally I tried cursing. I dumped a load on him that would have made the

most inarticulate jerk, and particularly one the size of the Bird Man, knock my ears down. He took it all like it was so much birdseed.

For the next month or so nothing particular happened. Then one roasting hot day in the middle of July something did. There were four people in the churchyard that day — the Bird Man, myself, a father, and his noisy little son. The boy was dressed in a sailor outfit and was armed with a variety of racketsy toys — mechanical autos and tanks, a shovel and a pail (which from time to time he filled with gravel and dumped into his father's shoes), and a slingshot. The Bird Man and his flock kept an eye on the child and stayed well to the far end of the yard. The streets were empty except for a policeman who spent most of his time by the fountain, dipping his handkerchief in the water and wiping it over his red face. The sidewalk cafés on the shady side of St.-Germain were packed. Those on the sunny side were empty. I had sometime before given up the idea of writing and was half dozing in the sun. I couldn't quite get to sleep because each time I was about to pop off, the brat wound up one of his toys and sent it rattling over the gravel. And each time the birds would fly up into the trees where they'd wait till the spring-motor died.

Nevertheless, it would have been an agreeable afternoon had not the brat suddenly tired of his toys and taken up the slingshot. He singled out a bird that had wandered too far away from the others, loaded his slingshot, and proceeded to stalk the bird like a big game hunter after lion. I watched out of partly closed eyes as he pulled back on the rubber bands, never dreaming he'd fire. I noticed that the Bird Man had hopped out of his flock and was watching nervously as the bands stretched farther and farther back.

Suddenly the big game hunter let go. There was a dull thud, and the bird rolled over, its legs thrust into the air like a picture of Cock Robin in a children's book.

« I got him, papa! » the hunter squealed.

What happened next happened so fast I couldn't move for amazement. First the Bird Man pounced on the boy and with one whack sent him tumbling senselessly along the path. When he stopped rolling his legs didn't stick up in the air at all. They just flopped out like broken twigs. Then the Bird Man turned to the father, his arms whirling like blades of an electric fan. He was punching and clawing and pounding the startled gent's face all at the same time. And for the first time he spoke. All the while he was belaboring the father he was filling the air with healthy oaths. His voice was as shrill and penetrating as a peacock's. Later I remembered that everything he said was something I had used on him.

Now the Bird Man had the father on the ground and was kicking him into insensibility. Just as I started across to help the father, the red-faced policeman came roaring through the gate swinging his white nightstick. He clipped the Bird Man squarely on the head, smashing his tuft of quetzal feathers and sending him on his face.

I picked up the boy's pail and raced across the street and filled it at the fountain. I wiped the boy's ear where the Bird Man had clouted him, and cleaned the gravel from his face. Not wanting to move him for fear he was internally banged up, I left and started in on the groaning father.

« I'm going to call the wagon, » the policeman said. « You stay here and see that fool doesn't escape. » He ran across the street to the café and was back in a moment and we both worked on the father. By the time the wagon arrived the father and son had come to. But not the Bird Man. He was still face down in the gravel, his feathered cape covering his head. The brat was wandering around the yard rubbing his ear and bawling like a wounded calf. I wished the Bird Man had hit him harder. The father's eyes, puffy and swollen, were slowly closing. His face was pulped, and his clothes were hanging in ribbons.

The policeman and the wagon driver carried the Bird

Man out of the yard and dumped him into the wagon. After making all of our names, they drove off for the station.

« Can you and your boy get home? » I asked.

« I think so, » he mumbled through thick blue lips. With that they left, the brat still bellowing and the father stumbling blindly along.

I looked about the yard. It was littered with feathers, and the boy's toys, like playthings forgotten when snow falls, were partly hidden beneath them. I took a last look at the dead bird: its legs were still sticking straight up. Then I went across to the café and had a double shot of Courvoisier.

The next morning Becker and I went to the police station. Becker was pretty much broken up over the mess the Bird Man had got himself into. And he was sore as hell at the father and son. « He ought to have killed them both, shooting a bird with a slingshot. The goddamn pigs! »

We asked at the desk what had happened to the Bird Man.

« He's gone. He was taken to an asylum last night. He should have been in one years ago. Imagine beating a small child! »

« He ought to have used a blunt weapon, » Becker said.

« Sir?... »

A heavy-set, moustached chief — the type you can spot at 100 meters — walked in. « Hello. I heard you from my office. I'm on my way to his rooms. Want to come along? »

Indeed we did.

We climbed into the chief's Peugeot and drove down Rue de Rennes, past the churchyard, and turned into Rue de l'Abbaye. Then we turned into Rue de Furstenberg and just beyond the Delacroix atelier we pulled up before an ancient, moldy white building.

« He lives here? »

« Yes. Has a room on the top floor, » the chief answered.

« How do you know? I thought no one knew where he lived, » Becker said.

« Oh, sure. We've watched him for years. But he's al-

ways been funny — up to now... Let's go. It's a good long hike. Watch the steps, they're about to collapse. »

I could smell the room two floors below. And when the chief kicked open the door the stink roared out like a black cloud and almost knocked me flat. The room was matchbox in size. The faded blue walls were painted with yellow stripes running up and across the ceiling where they converged in the center at the lightless socket. The washstand was covered with dirty white oilcloth and shaped to resemble the porcelain drinking well in a bird cage. On the opposite wall was a similar oilcloth well partly filled with stale bread crusts. The floor was covered with a layer of dirt and crusts and filth 3 centimeters thick. The room was truly a bird cage on a grand scale. And smelled like one that hadn't been cleaned for 50 years. The chief and I held our noses, but Becker was beside himself with joy.

« It's unbelievable! » He went about the room poking into the wells, picking up scraps, and thoroughly enjoying himself in the crud. « Listen! Neither Lautréamont nor Erasmus ever dreamed up anything to touch this. He's a genius — the master! »

« Let's get the hell out of the master's nest, » the chief said, sounding like his nose was stopped with a summer cold. We had to drag Becker from the room. Had the chief let him, I'm sure he would have moved in and set up housekeeping.

During the next four months either Becker or I made it a point to look into the churchyard at least once a day. But the Bird Man was never there. His room had been boarded up and a sign reading *Closed By Order Of The Police* was nailed on the door, the same sign they use to close a stew. We made inquiries at the police station: « Can't you at least tell us what's happened to him? » They couldn't. The papers had been mislaid, or lost. They didn't even know in which asylum he was. Nobody in his right mind will ever

seek information from a French government agency — they're all like a Kafka novel in a diving bell. But as a last resort we called on several of them. The above statement still goes.

Then one day in the early part of November we saw him once again. It was a lovely day, a hangover from summer. The sun was bright and warm and there were a few leaves on the trees. Becker and I were sprawled out on the benches in the churchyard sopping up this last bit of sunshine. Two children rolled hoops around our benches and over our feet, but when we didn't provoke they grew tired and left us alone. I must have been dozing because when I heard the sound of footsteps on the gravel I sat up with a start. A tall, gaunt man dressed in a cheap blue serge suit was just sitting down on the bench opposite mine. I didn't recognize him until he looked up. Then I saw his eyes. The pupils were no longer so large, but they were still a piercing blue-black. And no one could have mistaken his nose, knife-edge thin and hooked like a macaw's beak over his mouth. For a moment he stared at me as though trying to place me in his memory. Then he looked down at the ground. I nudged Becker.

« What? » he asked, rubbing his eyes.

I pointed to the man on the bench.

« It's him, it's him! » Becker whispered excitedly.

For some time we all sat quietly. The man occasionally lifted his eyes to look at us, then turned them back to the ground at his feet. Some birds were hopping about the yard, but they went no closer to him than to us. The attraction seemed to have vanished. It was about this time that I noticed him suddenly sit rigidly on the bench and follow with his eyes a fat little sparrow. No part of the man moved but his eyes. They were like hunters hidden behind the blind of his body. Meanwhile the sparrow hopped jauntily up the path. Finally it stopped and cocking its head looked first at the man, then at us. Very slowly the man took from a pocket a crust of bread. He tore off a bit and held it out to the sparrow. The bird eyed the crumb, then hopped over and pecked at it.

I didn't even see his hand close. It worked with the speed of a hair trigger, because suddenly there the sparrow was in his fist, twisting its head this way and that, and chirping like mad. The man held it up and stared into its frightened eyes. I didn't look at Becker. But I could feel his tenseness as he sat forward on the bench. We were absolutely fascinated, like snakes by the fakir.

Seconds passed.

Then as suddenly as the hand had snapped shut to catch the bird, it snapped once again. There was a sound like the crushing of an empty matchbox, and the sparrow's head fell limply over the man's thumb. Then silence. I could hear Becker's furious heart pounding. I put my hand on his arm to stop him from leaping wildly on the man.

The Bird Man looked up, his face set and unsmiling. Very slowly he got to his feet and holding the dead sparrow out like a rare gift he walked across to me and dropped it in my hands. I looked up into his eyes. They were no longer piercing. Now they were a weak watery-blue, and slightly moist. A little drop of water on the tip of his nose sparkled in the sunlight.

MARYA ZATURENSKA

A FRIEND'S SONG

*Soon to reach you where you are —
Far away — O, dear to me,
Far away and very far
From silence and hostility
Rise the cities where you roam
Far away, and far from home.*

*Stretching out my spirit hand,
I can touch you where you lie
In the much-contested land
Where the wounded heroes sigh,
Far away the lullaby
Of the sullen beach and strand,*

*Far away and far from me.
Neither rock, nor reef, nor snow,
Neither death nor calumny,
Neither the wild stress and flow
Of storm and tempest, wind and woe
Of the shipwreck-ridden sea
Can turn, or change, or take from me
Longing, love, and constancy.*

LOVE SONG

*Now the opening door stands wide,
When your light reveals the light
Drowned in time's great oceanide
Let your eyes put out the night,
Dry the darkening floods that rise*

*Everywhere but in your eyes.
Always in your presence stand
The earth-trapped angels of our clime,
Reveal, reveal that happier land
Seen in dreams and not of time,
Lost among the lost they roam
Till your lost voice calls them home.*

THE TWISTED TREE

*Too brief the sunlight when it smote
Our summer-haunted life! but caught
The dark tree's slowly brightening thought
Saw fruit of fire and snow
Upon the topmost bough
And felt with love that gaze of fire
The body sick with lost desire
And heard the sad, once-lovely note,
Through choirs of change and evening, float
Beneath the twisted tree
The twisted spellbound tree.*

*I heard the bird of morning sing,
Rise phoenix-like and shimmering
In sudden holiday*

P O E M S

*We let our forgotten bodies air
In streams of daybreak, freshening, new
And saw the sky's recurrent blue
Through dark and cold, through fire and dew
The bird sang everywhere
Beneath the trembling tree
The shivering storm-wracked tree.*

*Then in our bones and in our blood
The black autumnal flood
Ran clear in sleeping veins, and ran
Through pure, wild sunburst, and the air
Revealed its sun-struck beauty — joy!
Joy! Joy! reborn burst into flower!
Once more Joy blessed the living hour
Lit up the twisted tree
The nine-time twisted tree of death.*

HORACE GREGORY

GIFTS OF THE AGE

*The sky hung cloudless for ninety days
May into August: the sun's golden aether
And moon's broad river of pouring light*

*Are tremulous in air. I come with presents:
Striped Roman violets and blood-red cut
Carnations — and from another climate*

*Within a bird cage watchful marmosets —
All gifts grown from moist grasses, split
Granite, or from difficult places where*

*No life seems to stir, where earth is
Empty as the plateau of a beggar's hand.*

*I bring you these: violets, carnations,
Marmosets, the cage that holds them, each
Incomplete without the other. Violets*

*Wilt in an hour, fade into colors of dust,
Carnations dipped in water endure a week,
But marmosets, being both wild and tame,*

*Wake and sleep fitfully, replenished by
Shreds of corn, by flies and beetles. They
Have been known to live ten, twenty years*

*Careless of those who tend them. Violets,
Carnations are of the sun. When the moon's*

*Lost behind eyelids closed in sleep, from
Deepest shade the marmosets arrive. One
Sees their faces between leaves, crevices,*

*Between the bars, grave faces of small boys,
Speechless and docile, as though each age,
Golden or silver, stone, iron, brass were*

*Unfit for comment or tedious rehearsal.
The violets droop, the carnations breathe
Fragrance to the sun, the pouring moon.*

*The cage opens its door to a midnight star:
It is as though the walls of the room were
Vines, as though lintel and shelf were trees*

Above the dark, standing in cloudless air.

A CONCERTO WITH THREE SPEAKERS

ONE:

*As if the evening had waited for a concert
Cats mewed, dogs barked, and swallows whirled
Over tiles, through rafters: wild clapping
Of wings in air: then antique silence where
Caverns opened to receive the sun. A match
Takes fire from the wind; through terraced
Corridors I hear stilled voices; in crowds
I see new foreign faces.*

TWO:

*Where is the concert:
Where are drums, brasses, piano, flute
And the first violin? We have come to hear it
With tickets in our hands. We saw crowds
Gather and we followed them.*

ONE:

*From the pale arras
Rose leaves and pollen drift to the floor;
Beyond the garden, clatter of knives, of forks,
Of breaking glass. The feast has passed;
Were you invited to it?*

THREE:

*I knew it:
We are too late, too soon; it is because
We are neither guests nor friends. Look at
The crowds: chairs, love seats, sofas, tables
Set in aisles across the hall. We have been
Promised music. We carry photographs of what
We are or seem to be. I have a face that smiles.*

A CONCERTO WITH THREE SPEAKERS

ONE:

*You must wait: even the sounds of evening
Climb the walls, enter the room through closing
Doors before you hear distinctly what they mean.
You may sit or stand or go away.*

TWO:

*We travelled
Half the world to hear the music; we come
From happy homes with boredom, lust, grief,
Divorce, pity for the way we live—tickets
In hand waiting for real music, music
That tells us what to feel, how to know
What we should know — music to give us
Sleep that is not sleep but waking on
An island far into night. We have paid for
Arias, duets, concertos, symphonies,
Entire operas, music flowing upward
From wells beneath the house, beneath the floors;
We have bought them. The best seats are ours.*

THREE:

*Music is love. There is nothing we love so much
As real musicians. I may be foolish but love
Is personal, not big and vague—and it
Should be musicians; it must be someone playing
As if the strings would break. I cannot
See musicians anywhere.*

TWO:

*You talk too much;
Keep quiet. They may refuse to give us music.*

ONE:

*There is silence overhead among the clouds:
A city rises from the last rays of the sun,*

*An Etruscan city of purple hills and vineyards,
Buttresses, watchtowers, the walls surrounded
By fiery lakes, waters of air, of blood-red aether,
Above them earth-colored warriors and gods.*

THREE:

*We are not welcome here; the other people
Have walked in and taken every seat;
I hope they are not here to fall asleep,
Such a waste of time.*

ONE:

*And from distant hills
There is the sound of rain. Few hear it.*

TWO:

*Someone has lit a curtain behind the stage;
It is a picture trembling in the wind:
A dance of centaurs in a painted forest
And with them girls in obvious distress
Who are drunk, cheering or in tears;
I never knew that centaurs were unkind,
But thought them teachers bearded with knowledge,
Friends of young men following Achilles —
I wish I knew the title of that picture.*

ONE:

*It is not 'The Murder of the Innocents,'
But is of deeper, difficult antiquity;
The young women, both willing and distraught,
Are creatures of an earlier fall — after it
Laughter in caves, cries among reeds and grasses,
And spent souls walking the gray wilderness.*

A CONCERTO WITH THREE SPEAKERS

THREE:

*He seems to be talking of a bacchanal,
A stupid party where everyone stamps in
Like horses in a corral, the strangest people
One wouldn't talk to in the street, women
In big hats: shoulders like football captains'
And feet like horses' feet shaking the floor,
Amazons or centaurs, they all look alike, '
Plunging, shouting, upsetting chairs and tables,
Creatures left over from the First World War,
Nasty and loud because they're older, bitter —*

ONE:

That is not what I said.

TWO:

*Look at the curtain:
It is beginning to fade. If you stop talking
Perhaps they'll give us music. Other people
Are very quiet.*

THREE:

Maybe musicians are getting drunk.

ONE:

*Another scene shows windows to the west:
Tall Venus, the first star: the dark-winged
Cypress leaning against the moon and there,
Beneath her path, down shaded hill and valley
Olive tree and vine asleep in silver mist.*

TWO:

*I think I hear hoofbeats and sighs, echoes
Of weeping in the dark, or frightened by
Heat-lightning, a lost child sobbing among
Rocks, birdcalls —*

THREE:

*That reminds me of New England,
My Aunt who kept Dead Passions in a cage,
Embalmed canaries: one she called Emerson,
The other was Thoreau; she said both died
For love of Emily. She could imagine
They were singing her 'songs and snatches,'
Her words. Sometimes she said the birds
Were herself and Uncle Henry in the morning
Waking to see sunlight on snow, the room
Blind with light. But that was long ago,
Something remembered when both were young
And scarcely knew each other. I think
You imagine what you can't hear, or hear things
You think you should.*

Two:

*This is an intermission.
I feel an intermission in the air,
Everything in deeper silence than before.*

THREE:

*I see a gloved hand waving and people leaving,
And above the stage someone is taking
The applause and vanishing in space.*

ONE:

At this hour, observations are uncertain.

Two:

*It is odd to feel that music was not played,
But acted, talked about like wilted fragments
Of an overture and faintly heard.*

A CONCERTO WITH THREE SPEAKERS

*We did not come for that; we came to make
Ourselves forget the world; that's what we wanted;
There has been no concert.*

ONE:

*You are sure
That nothing happened?*

THREE:

Yes.

ONE:

*Many are always
Waiting for what they expect to see, to hear:
The actual event passes in darkness, silence;
The ikon burns in noiseless fire on the wall.
The crowd before rostrum sleeps or cheers,
Tosses its pennies at the stage and leaves.
I could tell you that this place is where
White Daphne changed to laurel;
And pastoral silence echoes in the sky;
The Great Wain turns within a crown of light.*

ELEANOR ROSS TAYLOR

AT THE CARNIVAL

*At the carnival I told fortunes;
Vested in maskery, I told the hands.
A moment left me with my own outfanned,
My worn heart lines maze-fallen into place,
A crow's foot one finger could unlace no loop of.*

*(Now for the heart of the matter...
Nobody touches his heart. That's private,
The glint inside a stone inside a cavern,
The jungle pool only the hoverers see.*

*And they saw ours;
That glassware innocence of stars
Marked up the diamond guilt:
Two,
Swiftling it along the king's highway
At free close kinless tilt,
When trucks jeered past protecting each other
Like old mother and son
Or grandfather and daughter;
The numb lights lingered on our motley coats;
The sand grains clung together in thin flocs.
Hedges and white sand roads froze,
That hardest winter,
And never came again —
Blocked off, the last bat-out-of-hell roads:*

Closed, Under Destruction;
 One night so dark the eyesight shivered,
 As if a darkness snowed,
 Then a night so bright the stars,
 Their white leached out, hung glintless pastes,
 Not night, not day, some other tell of time,
 Some other time so fast our stops seemed haste.
 It was so cold we could only hope to hurt each other;
 Never were hands gripped harder;
 Two, skirting light and faced
 With the indicative gullets of a farmer's dogs —
 « Never let it be said we led a chase... Drop flat. »
 A liking for the black that darked out names,
 But shame for anything like shame
 Rage for a scant publicity of flares, or flags —
 Bad waters licked under the cruiseways frozen over,
 Cornstalks like catscratch harassed my witch's garb.
 « Those one-eyed rabbits, loping, slow... »
 « Give them the slip? They're in the know...
 What do they know? A sneaking might —
 A fool contraption with double sight. »
 Love-words fell numb, they whispered out, one burst,
 And a mist settled no growth could overgrow.
 That bracelet I lost there, I'd prize the price of now.
 Its faint sapphire might break the ice fire's hanging in —)

Eyes, don't beseech me so!

FORBEARANCE

I. UNCLE

Typical of the presents Grandma gave Grandpa was Uncle
 Mun,
 A baroque octagonal buckle not to be undone.
 He thought before he spoke,

*Abstained from drink, smoke,
 Snuff, marriage; ate and dressed frugally;
 Reproved, respectfully, his mother's yen
 For jet beads on her seventieth birthday.
 And was it not thoughtful of him
 On the day of her death to elicit this information
 Dictated from the deathbed
 Laid away in pencil on tablet paper for me,
 Posterity?*

*My full name is Aminta Dunlap Watkins Ross
 My mother was Merina Wilkerson
 My father was Arnold Watkins — he carpentered —
 I married your pa Whitson Ross
 My wedding presents were a feather bed and two hens.*

II. GRANDMOTHER

*The hens gone on the honeymooning coach
 Squawking and scratching at the black hope chest;
 She made her bed and it was hard, for rest
 Too hard; when broken dreams and sleep encroached
 Upon stark wakefulness, she walked the stars;
 Her unread eye imagined what they meant —
 Job's Coffin and the Seven Sisters, the fine-print
 Groups; then what said those blazing sky-far,
 A sky not like a page, a script not like a word,
 But taking or leaving a star, a world
 As it just chose?
 How the hymn book puzzled her,
 Singing « Jesus and Shall » —
 And the notes of the music
 If one read, like the choir!
 'Tis midnight in my soul till He
 Bright morning star! bid darkness flee.*

III. GRANDFATHER

The fear of hell was all, his children wheezed,
 That wore Whit Ross's pants out at the knees.
 His poverty enraged him (a hoe to cultivate flint rocks,
 Breeches to thwart the briers)
 His wits fanned up his ignorance like a fire.
 Something savage in him bruted
 An it, a him, a she —
 If he had been nobility —
 Beaten sexless lifeless souls touched him.
 When a black boy Joe died —
 What had he ever had from life to give to death? —
 He stopped in a far-off corner of the pasture
 And cried his tears.

 « A Christian spirit needs not cherry bounce,
 Mint, try to be a good woman —
 The Bible says! »

IV. GRANDPARENTS

The Bible says!
 The Bible looked not right to her.
 It should be short, straight lines, well lit,
 Not run-on continuities the stops left out
 So hard to read for true —
 The Bible Says!
 She wept before the finger.
 She went and got her eldest son
 In the middle of the day.
 « Boy, pray for me. »
 His coattails, her calico black skirts
 Puddled about the shoes and knees.

 Was it forgiven? It was gone,

*The heathen dancing with her giggling sisters;
 They flew about the room in heather weskits
 Like eight wax dolls gone flaskwards.
 Those were gay days!
 She sighed a mournful tune
 Waddling about her everyday affairs of life and death
 (Affairs of painful life, uncertain death):
 « Wild loneliness that beats its wings on life, » she sang.
 She thwacked a pone in two
 Her big hand for a knife.
 Thar! stirring it up severely
 And thar! into the oven...
 'Twould be wormwood and ashes...
 A spray of peacock feathers
 Begged from her father's house
 Splattered the dining room wall.
 (She pretended to Whit that she dusted with it.)
 The table was small for nine;
 The honeycomb, buttered, hived in glass vines.*

V. GRANDDAUGHTER

*When she was old, deaf, widowed, and my grandmother
 She came to spend a lonely night at home.
 I went to call her to a tardy breakfast
 But she did not hear my brave voice for her comb
 Running through her hair in little flights —
 Long, long hair as much gold as white,
 Flying with the old-fashioned electricity
 From the comb's old-fashioned friction)
 As she rocked, her shell-combs on her knees;
 Suddenly aware of my presence she looked up at me
 Through her shimmering hair,
 Startled, and smiled. Air ye awake, little gal?
 Perhaps she thought I was admiring her.
 She gave me a proud, delighted, sidewise smile*

Flashing her little graying teeth and elf-arched eyes,
 Not doubting a ninety-eight-point-six degrees' response.
 But she was disappointed, though I smiled too.
 Her silent island threatened me enchantment;
 The joints too limber to creak when I bent over
 Sailed off without even picking up
 A big bone hairpin wrecked upon the floor.

The day she was buried
 I played sick and lay abed
 Claiming fever. I did not see her dead.
 But eight months before
 At Rehobath Church on Homecoming Day
 I stood with a group of boys and girls
 And watched her cross the churchyard slowly,
 Alone; from end to end she crossed the yard
 Her head thrown back, swathed deep in black —
 Long skirts, pointed black toes,
 The wind parting her many veils,
 The blue eyes beneath roving, veiled —
 And leaning on a stick. She seemed a giant Figure,
 All eyes upon her; yet none spoke.
 And all my heart said, Run to her! Claim her!
 (Wild loneliness that beats its wings on death)
 But she was so deaf.
 My child's voice scarcely left,
 I did not grasp the veils.

When I think now of the words I should have wrung
 My voice strikes ferment on my tongue.

DAVID WAGONER

YESTERDAY

*Mistaken at dawn, I rose and took the sun.
My eyes, streaming the light of sleep, looked out
On death in the weeds and anger in the stone,
Remorse in the enormous oak and doubt
In the shape of animals. I named them One.*

*Misled at noon, I walked unlike the rest.
My eyes, holding the dark of sleep, looked past
The floodlit arenas of the groin and breast,
Where strangers touched each other, at the vast
Assassinated throngs. I called them blest.*

*Misinformed at dusk, I chanced upon a love.
My eyes, piercing the tears of sleep, looked through
The hazy flesh at the heart's root, saw the rough
Fibre, my enemy, rise and rise anew
And fall and brim with blood. I thought it enough.*

*Mislaid at night, I turned on a hard bed.
O my eyes, struck by the sleep of sleep, looked back*

To the day and forth to the easy daylight fled
 From my sight forever, to the clamped and flaunted black
 Of thing and man and love. I called them dead.

Misnaming them dead, I slept. But woke in pain
 And found my eyelids streamed with light again.

ADMONITION

Will have none of it, no, not even the wrath against enemies
 That comes as easily as trick words or women to my hand.
 Scratchback, spit in the soup, tits and tats: all of them lies
 In the face of light whose look no hackwork can withstand.

, with more cocks than hens, more seeds than holes,
 Crawl through pastures where the slate runs slantwise out of
 flaws,
 Where the tough wind sticks its neck for nothing over the
 hills
 To pierce me through the head. But no, no. I raise hooked
 claws.

It shall not be from rage nor from anger, this violence
 Of eye and ear. Out of no known fakery, it will cry:
 What called me? Why? When will the flame and foam make
 sense?
 How shall I quicken? Who are those animals? Where am I?

MEMENTO MORI

*In my list of choices, death had not appeared
The forest in my head, the scrambling words,
The stars and motes behind my eyes grew fierce
And fearsome before sleep. But none were black.
None loomed. In the trees were only birds to be feared;
In words, their loss; in stars, their merciless swords.
By the praise of my flesh, I could always pierce,
With clean ferocity, sleep's cul-de-sac.*

*I moved through the flaking air and had my say.
Time held its mirrors to my face: I looked,
And nose to nose, I stared my image down.
The rout of cretinous horrors in the night
Had left me cold but steady in my day.
What if the light was huge and steep? I knocked
Out of pride against the sun and dune
To make them speak. They did. I took no fright.*

*Angels and ashes seemed the freaks of age.
'Bring out your dead,' I cried, and cocked my eye
To see the hillocks and the loam-beds stir.
Earth held. No bone broke out. No head of death
Sprang like a comet from the world at large,
Trailing its dark. 'Poets refuse to die,'
I wrote on stone. Yet now, O God in Thy blur,
Who is it stuffs this murdering dust in my breath?*

TERMINUS

*The taste of the day goes,
But we are left with tongues
In rooms nobody knows.*

P O E M S

*Shades draw the windows in;
The air waits in our lungs;
Around us, sounds begin*

*To quaver like our lives,
To dwindle like our songs.*

*Our hands, drawn up and down,
Shape nothing but ourselves:
We touch all that we own.*

*This was not so at noon
When nothing came by halves.
The bones forget soon.*

ISABELLA GARDNER

OF FLESH AND BONE

*Child and girl each morning summer winter or dismay
my eyes saw waterfalls my ears heard madrigals I ta-
sted strawberries touched moss smelt hay and roses, and
through the blue
the bright sky I with my first and once-love flew.
Willow-boned sun-marrowed and air-skinned,
seawater in my veins, I drank wine and the south-west wind.
The noun death and the verb to die were exiled from my
vocabulary, and when the salty boys and sunburned girls I
mooned with on the honeysuckled porch through locust-
loud and sigh-soft summer nights did speculate upon the
disposition of my dust
I said to them I am a girl of flesh and bone, my shift's no
shroud,
and d-e-a-t-h is the word I do not say out loud.
That is the word I said that I will not admit.
I had read of a fatal Irish ghost named IT
who reeked corruption and whose gaze was potent as the
basilisk's,
and IT became my euphemism for the noun I dared not risk
The salty boys bugled desire to die at thirty-five
and the girls harped a lust to be buried, not old, maimed
and alive.
I vowed that eyeless earless loinless lonely,*

would refuse to die; that even if only
 one sense was left me, touch or smell or taste,
 I would choose to live; that in a sewer of waste
 thickets of pain a mountain of fear or the sea-
 rack of sorrow I would beg, steal, and betray, to be.

Girl and child my nightmare was the ceasing,
 not the attendant pinch and panic, but the releasing
 of the I. Now that my blood's a sweeter blend,
 now that my bones are bones and do not bend,
 now that my skin is dressed, what sucks my marrow
 is not the final fact of IT but the engagement some to-morrow.
 The certainty, in spite of locking doors and looking into
 closets, that IT may wait

round That corner, under an unfamiliar bed, or through
 next summer's gate,
 the meeting of IT's gaze in a sick second's recognition of
 infinite danger
 and then the slow or swift but unrefusable embrace and the
 intolerable anger.
 I am not faithless but with those who see no future in eternity
 I do agree;
 no paradise and no inferno will resolve the coming nothing-
 ness of me.
 Mice and lions also die but God spared beasts our « knowing
 that we know »
 to-day and yesterday, to-morrow, creeds and crimes ago.
 Now mornings are still miracles and my dear now-love is
 my true
 love and we fly we fly... O the sky was never once so bright
 and blue
 and I still wish to live with living's theft-
 ing and assault if even one sense will be left,
 out to evade the miles and meals of waiting

*I might elect the hour of my abating,
to « cease upon the midnight with no pain », or fright,
and go, unlike brave Dylan, gently into that long night.
But flesh and bone is willful, and the hard core of my horror
is the terror
that I still will kick and claw when IT's eyes stare out at
mine in every mirror.*

CLEVELAND MOFFETT

A COSTLY PROJECT

for Luisa

A costly project, yes, but the real project was not so much the constructing of the damn thing as it was the preliminary discussions and decisions about it: this funicular.

(A tourist in a big touring car parked where ten horses could have tethered and blocked the horse trough so that the horses had to be led onto the sidewalk to get a place to drink from, and the pedestrians had to walk around them into the street. The tourist in a big check jacket went into the tavern, ordered two kinds of drinks they did not have, settled for beer and started talking to anybody within earshot. He said among other things that their town should have a funicular running up the mountain to that old fortress or whatever it was on top.)

Such conjectural projects for the community as these were usually termed 'investments,' meaning that they would 'eventually' be 'justified' by their own 'lucrative' ends. — Oh, it was undoubtedly a good idea, but just the same that was no reason not to object to it.

Then since it could not go around or through the houses it was decided to go over them, and thus the funicular became a chairlift, and the argumentations changed to questions of a man's rights to the space above his own property, which got so complicated that it was impossible even to determine

whether they were absurd or not. Some said the boundary of this fourth dimension was obviously the sky; no, it should certainly be the apex of the roof; which was quickly amended by What about the chimney? and somebody else said he had a lightning rod. One man had a tree that was taller than his house, What about that?, etc. Furthermore, questions were now brought up that nobody had ever thought of before: such as the air being encroached upon by a neighbor's overhanging shed roof or long-branched shade tree, etc., etc.

In the meantime, however, no time was lost; work was begun almost promptly and went ahead without interruption because the ones with the authority did not intend to stop it and those who wanted to had no authority. A committee was formed to go about pacifying the irate, threatening the stubborn, informing the ignorant.

As it was, no chimneys had been knocked down, not even a flagpole, nor any tree branches lopped. The chairlift was to pass quite close in certain points, but without touching, it was assured. (So the old grumblings died and new ones took their place.) The distance was something like two miles of a slow incline, mostly foothill where, past the houses, nothing but light gray stones appeared up to an abrupt bulwark of boulders, giving on the town side the illusion of a gentle hill, while on the other side it descended, dropped almost, very rapidly and far.

The chief encouragement for the plan was the fact that up there some monks had left abandoned an ancient stone monastery. It had not been good for anything for a long time and not even children went near it because it was supposed to be thoroughly haunted. Here was an opportunity to get some use out of the place by fixing it up somehow. It was already sort of attractively repulsive like a weird species of huge prehistoric toad; especially in a certain shadowy light, near dusk, it required little imagination to see it as such. It was unpopularly known as the Toad when anyone had occasion to mention it, which was usually rarely,

until recently when talk of the project had brought up the subject of the Toad more often...

A group had hiked up to take a good look at it and reported back that it was in stone-solid condition and just the thing for a tavern if not quite large enough for a hotel. There were no ghosts, there was a lovely long view, and all that was needed was to clear out the musty coffins and altars, and of course install the necessary plumbing and electricity.

So in the end it was not actually a funicular at all, in that it had seats instead of a car suspended from the cable. They were the cable chairs that skiers use. (At first there had been a few practical jokes, boys with peashooters...but nothing serious.) A schedule was worked out for two operators on shifts to run it, beginning in the morning at ten o'clock and continuing through the day, often to irregular hours of the following morning — according to the customers.

After a few seasons it got gradually squeakier.

There was one family below the hill peculiarly connected with the comings and goings of the chairlift. The man and wife ignored the whole thing quite successfully. Their son was one of the operators; he made good money, so they seldom saw him. Carla was not yet born. The only one in the house who showed any special interest in the contraption was the grandmother; she hated it. The cables ran by directly in front of the upstairs window of her room. While she would be working at this window, darning or knitting or reading tea leaves, a large shadow would dim the light and for a moment a dangling stranger would peer curiously in — as if she were the spectacle and not he! She brought down the curse of her forefathers on the heads of the whole community. She had had a father who would never have stood for such things — but her sons were made of a different stuff.

Her daughter-in-law said that her complaining was the worst of it.

« I am old and if I cannot shout let me at least grumble! » she managed practically to shout. And yet she refused

to stay out of the room during the day; she did not want to come downstairs, she would not go out on the back porch.

« You like to complain, you love it! Why don't you take your old rocker out onto the highway and get mad at all the cars that will throw dust on you? » the daughter-in-law shouted upstairs.

And back down the stairwell came a raucous answer, and always the last word. The daughter-in-law looked at her husband and he shrugged.

One day it was too much. The damn thing was being particularly squeaky, the peeping passers-by extraordinarily nosy. The darning egg had rolled under the wardrobe, there wasn't a legible leaf of tea in the house. And again! — for a second the room darkened and a sniggling voice from the window said, « Hi there! »

Then it was that she saw her father's stern portrait hanging above her bed suddenly glare at her and she trembled with shame before him. Without another hesitation she almost jumped to the window calling out, You hey you come back here you! Three times she ran around the room picking up and putting down objects either too light or too precious. In no time she was equipped.

With a long hickory shepherd's staff she took to beating each defenseless passenger as he rolled by. They were like rugs hanging on a clothesline. Every occupant of a chair as it approached could see perfectly what was so inevitably going to happen to him; and he or she cursed or screamed but they all, one by one, had to close their eyes and cringe when their turn came. Regardless of age or sex she leaned far out of the window and whacked away at them furiously.

Ten of them in all met this fate before the machinery could be halted, because of the fact that it was impossible to tell from above just exactly in what position a chair might be down the hill; that is, if directly in front of this mad woman's window or not. Nor were there any emergency means of communicating with the other end of the cable to tell them to stop putting more passengers, victims, on

It was better to allow ten to get bruised even if severely, than to let any one of them get beaten into a concussion or a compound fracture. So when the first bloody arrival could manage to splutter his story out, somebody was dispatched, after a quick delay of dismayed indecision, to ride a down-going chair and warn the operator to get the machinery turned off.

As each rider came up bleeding and wailing he was led away gently to take a good drink and lie down somewhere. One man claimed to have fought back with a good blow of his belt buckle: congratulations and free drinks.

The police went after her but she had already with her last violent gesture fallen out of the window and broken her neck.

The gravestone inscription is a long one but they say it is hard to read and mostly genealogy anyway probably.

While her mother still wore mourning, Carla was born. It was immediately agreed that it should always be kept a secret...about those excitements; the skeleton was closeted. And naturally Carla could not remember, but at night her dreams did and they told her something about it.

By now the chairlift had become generally accepted; the tourists could float by overhead without disturbing or being disturbed; the profit on it was considerable and equitable, and the squeak had become an institution.

When she was old enough Carla was given a room of her own to sleep in, the one that had been her grandmother's. Passengers continued regularly to peer in the window but Carla peered right back and sometimes they said Hello quite cheerfully and one lady even said Oh excuse me. The number of chairs was endless, or so she used to believe. When she learned they were only an endless repetition she was disappointed. All told there were really no more than twenty. Every moonlit night she watched the two long alternate files of solitary individuals passing each other and the roofs and treetops; slowly, above the fields on their way to the top or to the bottom. She asked somebody Where does it go?

but they said You'll never go there, so what difference does it make? So the difference it made was that she never asked anybody again.

It had once been objected that the careless dropping of matches and cigarettes down from the cablechairs into the dry underbrush was of serious danger to all the houses of the hillside. This objection had been unanimously sustained. The next day the dry underbrush caught fire and burned an overhead dangling passenger to the third degree. Carla had not been there but her imagination had many times after — the cheery bright bonfire sharp-cracking and warm — the swinging agitating figure above it, making so much noise — he manages to unfasten himself and hand over hand moves down the cable, his legs up tight, contracted beneath him.

The next day ash trays were installed and signs tacked up.

When the wind was right, coming down the hill, it carried noises of music and shrill laughing that Carla listened for all day and heard at night. Here her imagination could not penetrate. From below, hidden in a tree, she looked at the faces on the way up and at the faces returning — they were different. Did they all come back? She couldn't keep count. This moving bridge ferrying its precious burden: they of the dignity as precarious as their teetering balance — these people straight-strung along thin taut lines; beads, distantly separated but all of a string — when the wind blows these cradles will rock; when the sun shines the ladies with parasols; when the rain falls the empty senseless seats, a sorry-go-round, motion without motive, until finally it stops dead to wait. (The operator goes in out of the rain, remembering the chairs will have to be wiped dry afterwards.)

All this bothered her. Were things changing, or was she herself changing? When for herself she had sung songs no one else had ever heard before, and made vast collections of pebbles and peat moss, days too were playthings. Not now. As she grew bigger, first the bed and then the whole room grew smaller. This changing — she was already born and

she was not yet dead, so it was neither birth nor death; so what was it?

She did not realize it had begun with birth, so she felt that perhaps it had begun that day that lady's scarf fluttered down from the chairlift. Carla saw it and caught it up before it could touch the ground, as if it were a flag. The lady gave a surprised Ah! and a sorrowful Oooh!, twisted about and looked down, but Carla had already run off out of sight with it. It was a lovely enough scarf, colorful and soft, and for a few days a faint perfume remained with it. Every curlicue and swirl in the pattern fascinated her as if it were an ancient treasure map, and she traced it over many times thoroughly with her fingers. Safe under her pillow she kept it and at night wrapped it around her in place of a nightgown.

On this particular day she had been looking out the window — most of the view was trees; up on the left the roadshape summit squatted and hunched — up and down the cable lines the bright parasols were out. These customers traveled comfortably up in the air while their shadows bumped and dragged over rocks and through brambles below. For several minutes her mother had not stopped calling her, so by now she knew she would have to answer. In the same moment that she turned back into the room blackened by the sun in her eyes to seem a cavern, she knew she would not answer yet. The dark faded quickly and objects resumed their respective forms. From out of the wall the silly bearded old man gawked above her bed and at once annoyed her more than ever before. In a second she had tied her treasured scarf tightly about her neck and climbed onto the window-sill. Her balance was steady if her body jittered, as she waited for a vacant chair to come along, ignoring the occupants' remarks and warnings to her, and looking far down the line past these clothes-pinned people. It came, and tense and ready, she judged the leap perfectly and landed safely if sideways in the swaying chair.

As it progressed slowly uphill Carla looked ahead at the

gray destination growing larger, and then over her shoulder at her house growing smaller. Her mother was leaning far out over the window ledge shouting something and waving. At this a man, it must have been her father, came out on the porch and looked up too at the distancing figure. In the remaining seconds Carla, diminishing, watched them diminish; she waved and they waved; she called back Good-bye! good-bye! in answer.

They say that thereafter those funny rappings on the walls at night stopped entirely.

W. S. MERWIN

THE BLUE COCKEREL

*Morning was never here, nor more dark ever
Than now there is; but in the fixed green
And high branch of afternoon, this bird balances,
His blue feet splayed, folding nothing, as though
The too-small green limb were ground; and his shout
Frames all the silence. Not Montezuma nor all
The gold hills of the sun were ever so plumed
As the blue of his neck, his breast's orange, his wings'
Blazing, and the black-green sickles of his tail.
It seems to be summer. But save for his blue hackles
And the light haze of his back, there is no sky,
Only the one tree spreading its green flame
Like a new habit for heaven. It seems to be summer;
But on the single tree the fruits of all seasons
Hang in the hues of ripeness; but on the ground
The green is of spring, and the flowers
Of April are there. And he suspended, brilliant and foreign,
His wings as though beating the air of elsewhere,
Yet if he is not there, the rest is not either.
A cry must be painted silent: the spread red hand
Of his comb thrown back, beak wide, and the one eye
Glaring like the sun's self (for there is no other)
Like the sun seen small, seen rimmed in red secret,
May be the shape of jubilation crowing,
Or the stare and shriek of terror. And whose body*

*Is this in the foreground lying twisted sideways,
 Eyes glazed, whose stiff posture would become
 The contorted dead? Though its face gleams white
 It might be the self of shadow we have not seen,
 Night who was never here, or the hour itself
 There to be sung unmoved. Surely it is
 The eye's other center, and upon this,
 This only, the bird stares, and for this cause
 Cries, cries, and his cry crashes
 Among the branches, the blades of great leaves
 Looming like towers, the fruits and petals, green
 Thickets of light deeper than shadows, the moon-white
 Ears of that body lying, and makes
 And lends echo and moment to all that green
 Watery silence. But does he scream
 In joy unfading that now no dark is,
 Or what wakening does he herald with all terror?*

CORMORANTS

*High hawk and sea raven sailing in to the top trees,
 Swallows wheeling by the cliffside over the sea,
 And the raucous gulls swooping and homing, and then these
 So much lower than the angels, flying with their necks
 Strained forward a bare foot above the sea,
 Narrow wings beating heavily, flailing the faint mist,
 Gather now between the colours of afternoon
 And the colours of evening. Between the crag's huge feet
 Of rocks like smashed statuary the sluice
 Of the gray sea-way heaves and crashes,
 Swirls to and fro hairy fragments of palm fronds,
 Mats of kelp and cane. Light glints out at sea: gold,
 Blue, and the sky blue, and the farthest headlands
 Bronze and red in the late day, but here
 In the crag's splashed shadow it is already
 Cold and evening. The rook where they harbor*

is called the Dove-Rock, perhaps because it bears
 one olive-tree hardly more than a branch
 in what might be a mouth, and cranes out
 over the waste of water, watching
 as it were for the end of a promise.
 Shall there be no more, no more sea? Or could it have seemed
 as though the rock had descended once as a spirit
 here on its heaving shadow, and settled bravely
 or foolishly on these waves to wait? Here sagely
 before dark these birds beat and perch, indeed like spirits
 but heavily and not holy, swimming through the air,
 seeming neither fish nor fowl, but serpent,
 sea serpent partaking of fish and fowl,
 gain and clutch the precarious ledge and sit
 in a row like black flames on some other Pentecost,
 or gluttoned, bellies distended, wings spread lax for the wind
 to dry, seem like figures of judgment lifted up,
 like a frieze of elders above some cathedral portal
 proclaiming judgment, voracious judgment, judgment
 of the only sea and of all that from it rises,
 judgment by voracity. Like men they stand
 moaning, like women wailing, and calling they are
 black signatures of the horse-leeches daughters
 crying, crying. Where once, between fish and woman,
 the sirens sang from these wet rocks to wreck sailors,
 voracity has withered to a dark
 ambiguous bird clustering in the smell of the sea wrack
 between light and shadow, between air and sea, between
 earth and its resemblances; even the fish
 snatched in those ravenous beaks flash and slide
 at once between life and death. And by this we see
 though the sky should open for forty days and the Flood
 overwhelm the world again, yet amphibious
 voracity would bloat still and survive
 again as it did before, again and always,
 and raise its head at last under the olive branch.
 The birds stare and doze. The land-hills

*Drain blue, grow indistinguishable between
The hills of the night sea and the darkening hill
Of heaven, until all fades into the image
Of the sea that, made in its own image, rolls
Like a ravenous eye between sun and moon.*

LEVIATHAN

*This is the black sea-brute bulling through wave-wrack,
Ancient as ocean's shifting hills, who in sea-toils
Travelling, who furrowing the salt acres
Heavily, his wake hoary behind him,
Shoulders spouting, the fist of his forehead
Over wastes gray-green crashing, among horses unbroken
From bellowing fields, past bone-wreck of vessels,
Tide-ruin, wash of lost bodies bobbing
No longer sought for, and islands of ice gleaming,
Who ravening the rank flood, wave-marshalling,
Overmastering the dark sea-marches, finds home
And harvest. Frightening to foolhardiest
Mariners, his size were difficult to describe:
The hulk of him is like hills heaving,
Dark, yet as crags of drift-ice, crowns cracking in thunder,
Like land's self by night black-looming, surf churning and
trailing
Along his shores' rushing, shoal-water boding
About the dark of his jaws; and who should moor at his edge
And fare on afoot would find gates of no gardens,
But the hill of dark underfoot diving,
Closing overhead, the cold deep, and drowning.
He is called Leviathan, and named for rolling,
First created he was of all creatures,
He has held Jonah three days and nights,
He is that curling serpent that in ocean is,
Sea-fright he is, and the shadow under the earth.
Days there are, nonetheless, when he lies*

Like an angel, although a lost angel
 On the waste's unease, no eye of man moving,
 Bird hovering, fish flashing, creature whatever
 Who after him came to herit earth's emptiness.
 Froth at flanks seething soothes to stillness,
 Waits; with one eye he watches
 Dark of night sinking last, with one eye dayrise
 As at first over foaming pastures. He makes no cry
 Though that light is a breath. The sea curling,
 Star-climbed, wind-combed, cumbered with itself still
 As at first it was, is the hand not yet contented
 Of the Creator, and he waits for the world to begin.

THE HYDRA

You cannot know this place, for if there are names for it
 In the languages of other places they mean
 Nothing here where names are not, are not heard here
 Where sound is not born, not borne, is not conceived nor
 carried,
 Where the green light is of no air we walk in,
 Is too heavy for breathing, where rising and falling
 Are of submerged light clouded among the matted water
 plants,
 Fluttering of hair floating, long streamers trailing
 On a slow waving as though of warmed air, are in no way
 The mountings and descendings of any surface
 That we pretend to understand. Repose is here
 But not leisure, indolence but not stillness,
 Silence above the sliding floor and rich bed
 Of resemblances; and there, whether presiding
 Or merely predominatly there, fixed
 Amid that wavering, the single
 Hydra sways. Might it be that this silence
 Is but the deepest intensity of sound?
 The reeds make no music: their roots beneath all wind

*Breed silence, the shells are of swamp-mollusks only
 And whisper the noise of no waters, being filled
 With the water's self of silence and shadows.
 There, waving its tendrils into the far light,
 Blind, like a broad tree caught in a slow tempest
 Of effort or ease, it makes with its arms a motion but not
 Of music, but as though of hands meditating
 Across harp-strings that are not there, or as though
 There were a harp but no hands, and the strings, touched
 By no fingers, should have snapped slowly in the pellucid
 green,*

*Lashed loose from the strains of sound, and now afterwards
 Their waves emptied of the least hum and echo
 As threads drained of the last pearls, should whip
 Through the sliding frond-light, the streaked tremulous still-
 ness,*

*Not gently but with langour. Playing at slothful rivers
 Or like a net it casts itself lazily, and the faint silver
 Of small fish hovering on the far side of the light
 Shivers and vanishes; and it draws itself in
 Neither begging nor bewailing nor praying, though it uses
 The gestures of all these. Patience belongs to it; and it waits
 No farewells but finds itself alone. Then may its motion
 Divide like music, tear, sunder utterly
 Into two, and each part keep patient
 And each be whole, whole. We cannot know this place
 Though its light names all that we see, and though all mute
 Wavering, flowing of tendrils, sidling
 Of shadows, shifting of patience as the arms
 Of a mist might sway and shift in water,
 Are lucid music, if there were ears that might hear it,
 Though the deep intensity of this silence is a sound.*

WILLIAM BELVIN

WARNING TO GOLDFISH

*Your fronded throb of glittering describes... Oh where's
A thing to match delight with its descriptions?
This skirted song-ball bounce, for counter, strange, and spare
Rhumba, baits the waters that you sip on,*

*Longing, and the glassy edges of our room.
That's but one incidence, and of the tail,
Alone: and all sun's prodigy swirls before this boom-
Nose, butting mac-and-microcosmic bail.*

*Fish, are we not fortunate to have a tank
Of wriggling universals all our own?
Fish, glide in gold from God, and with stilled beauty thank
Me for a long seaweed and pebble loan.*

*And I'd but trace your traces with my hookless soul:
My heart. But my hard, gulping head must lunge
And batter at the cracking boundaries of the bowl,
Till all is lost, in this rude realtor's plunge.*

THE GEOGRAPHERS

*It is of little use to calculate
The hour; and even the most reluctant day,
That promised or loomed, turning in a pool,
Breaks at last and suddenly has sounded.
Clockwise or counterclockwise, all pointers swing
Into the massive medium: time confirms
More than every thing: the flow, forever.
Who questions this backwards-winding verity?
One needs but to address oneself in time
To the ultimate ink-blue whelming of a sea.*

*But where are we? Who has not loosely wandered
The cityless plains of wind, tensely plotting,
Without one known stone or dependable instrument,
Against his own inevitable disappearance?
Mostly the stiff, pin-pointed creatures, counting,
Upon a steeple that they have never seen,
Currents, where nothing ever comes but currents.
You're lucky enough if the world has a flock of pigeons
To just for the one time shatter the air to an opal,
Before the end, and black-dust ocean for ever.*

*And thus we count our jewel-perfect clocks
Not half so dear as the quaintly desperate
Geographies among us: largely illegible
Old projections or floating archipelagoes,
Of flora and fauna upon the unclimbed mountains —
Ornate, ambiguous, arbitrary and contrived
Of laws derived from other, stranger, laws,
Muttered by the leaves of forgotten forests,
And that incredible voice that spoke to men
Alone in the desert or rising from caves at morning.*

BRAIN

*Dumb thing, it stays all day and, stirring
In the damp but lighted cage, includes
The strange food given it. It worries
But little the forcing hand and broods
In labor, half penitentiary.*

*But in a changing of the breath —
Of the eye's angle — what changes!
Your threshing hand points azimuths
Of nothing, while the creature ranges.
Rich with tentacles beneath,*

*Folding in an easy progress —
A giant jellyfish — it flows
Through the ocean-surgings darkness,
And of the pitted shelf explores,
And channel, pied and homely largess.*

COLLOQUY OF VARIOUS VOICES

VOICE

*Beware, be careful — though this place seems peaceful,
Here the strangest accidents occur.*

VOICE I

*I am the snake inhabiting these bushes.
My holes are many and perfectly concealed.
I am a good prophet of every weather,
And when my skin's no longer oily
I can shed it. I love to lie in the sun.
Birds in these branches are numberless;
There is plenty of time for counting and catching birds.*

VOICE

Nothing ever stays where you have left it.

VOICE II

*I am wingéd and circle these bristling branches
Where the worm hides and also hides the danger
Of the great worm — but there is no great danger,
For I am I and we are numberless.
Sometimes I skid through the leaves I love
And hardly think of any worm or even
The whirling lover that I always seek.*

VOICE

In time the water of the fountains
Will slide over you like a wing or the sun.

VOICE III

*It is I who walk in this troubled garden.
Now, some strange accident has happened
To my hands, but still I'm surgeon:
Everywhere I look a crystal lady
Walks as footlessly as sunshine,
Soothing all the brambled horrors.
We will trim and sew up all in time.*

VOICE

In a change of light the benches are reeking altars,
And every vision is real and uncontrollable.

CHARLES SMITH

FOUR POEMS ON PICTURES

SAVED

ON EL GRECO'S FRAY HORTENSIO

*prudence is tempered by the mind to a fine point and
wielded*

Against the barking ego in defense of soul:

He sits upright,

*and fastidiously adjusted, sensitive lips redeemed from
former*

Scorn by watchful eyes, and the whole figure as if

Nailed in place

crucifixion thin-spread enough to last a lifetime without

*Breaking a bone of his will or blunting that fine point
with a*

Far-too-often-

o-keep-its-flavor broken cry of lamma sabacthani in the

Night of his proud spirit: now rejoice, you angels:

He is saved.

CHINESE WINTER LANDSCAPE

*A fisherman sits hunched in his tiny skiff on a glacial-looking
lake
And is no more moved by the freezing wind than the bare
trees on the shore,
Stiffened with ice among the snow-smooth crags; how must his
soul sit grey
And desolate as the sky, stretched zenith-to-nadir prostrate
sick unto death,
Indifferent to the sweet light and the will of growing things
— and yet,
Because he has been here many times before and just as
often seen
This huge bleakness crack from zenith downward to his own
heart's center
And felt within himself the sprouting of shoots and the
busy joy of birds,
All this is therefore beautiful as only the real can be, which
says
Not « Look what I'm not » but « Know me as I am, » and
which has always taught
The clean ice at the rock-core most declares itself when one
discovers
The long arm of the sun must reach even the heart's hard
Arctic.*

THE FIRE-BIRDLING

ON EL GRECO'S VIRGIN OF THE GOOD MILK

*Joseph Mary and Ann the Mother of Mary
Rise like battlements round the fragile Christ-child:
Like a nest their encircling hands, so anxious
Lest their big touch break Him,*

FOUR POEMS ON PICTURES

*Flame who born to be broken now burns softly
As a candle beneath the Mother-image:
Flame not to be quenched in its predestined
Blazing into a fire-bird*

*That must circle the whole world in its longing,
Hunting mate after mate to bear its image,
Sounding hill unto hill its call to all birds
Of its own fierce feather:*

*Joseph Mary and Ann the Mother of Mary,
Gentler, capabler hands than yours protect this
Phoenix who from the nest of His own bones shall
Rise like creation's morning.*

CHINESE MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPE

*Someone is playing a flute in a boat on a still lake in the mist
in the mountains,
Cliffs loom all around him and disappear and appear again
higher up,
And there is a wind breathing soft as a flute and the lean
arm of a pine
That moves in pensive rhythm, while among the cliffs the
voice of a cataract
Like a peony in a vase of stillness spreads its quiet fullness
Into the great night and communes with the wind the flute
and the roving mist,
And with the meditative dance of pines along the listening
water.*

M. CHADBOURNE

STORM BEFORE DAWN

*Storm breaks.
Wind swings
In topmost bough
Swift anger voiced,
Dark rush of ocean leaves,
Slow joy rejoiced.*

*And when the storm, undone,
Sits down to laugh
Fresh tears on quiet grass,
And when the birds still sleepy
Pick their tunes,
The blue is born
Blue-gold, deep-eyed,
The world is washed
Self-lit, steep-skyed,
The day is won
The green blows light
The wind runs round the sun.*

*Morning's in love
With all God left behind.*

THE BIG TENT

THE BIG TENT

inged by her scarves
the swinging light

This hand God made »

e took my right

This was
hen you were born. »

« The acrobat will dance
Upon the stairways of the air! »

Came through the night.

Four lines »

e said

Each running its course
cross the palm.
ie arrow Fate
aring the Mind
ad clear as Life
ould sing itself
nbroken
s the heart.

« He skims the rope
The moon unfurled!
His shadow rocks
The tented world!

Came through the night.

« You had not far to go »

She said and paused.

*« Your destiny was figured
with a sword. »*

« The shadow loses height! »

*Cried out the voice
The other voice*

*« The shadow of the acrobat
Is rushing toward the light! »*

« The horizontal line across the palm »

She held me fast

*« Has but a thought
To fill the enormous dark.
This path that skirts the pillars
And escapes to meet the stars
Your heart in fact
Keeps pact with destiny
And Life the bow
The curve around your thumb
Completes itself in a triumphal arch
That place where David sings
And all the prophets
And the poets after him
Pass
On the Way of Kings.
Give me the left. »*

he said.

« The acrobat has reached the final
rung! »

The voice was heard.

« His feet upon the light
The acrobat prepares to play the bird! »

« This hand you made. »

Her laughter rose
And cracked against the night.

« The arch
I cannot read
But all who passed beneath
Have gone away.
Your destiny » —

A drumming at the bottom of the world
A strange commotion in the pit
And someone cried

« He falls! »

The night picked up the word
And gathered motion
Fell around my neck
And echoed back

« He falls!
The acrobat has fallen!
He is dead! »

Flinging my thirty pieces on the table
I hid my hands forever
And I fled.

GEORGE ANDREW VUKELICH

THE MEMOIRS OF A YOUNG MAN

*These are the men with the oldcountry faces:
The look of long boat trips and the dung-filled spring field*

*The farmer came from outside of Bucharest
At nighttime he came: crossing the borders.
In the sun: he kept to the ditchways
And sucked at the damp grasses.*

*The plantingman seeding his loamsoil called America.
In his dreams: before the raw mornings
He followed the big Percherons for miles and miles.*

*The guards: smoking in the corn dust around the che
points:
Beyond their boots: the new countries began
The man hit for the ravines and creekbeds.
Waiting: he atedown the hard sausage bits.
The sun moved closer in to see.*

*The olddreams have been ploughed under: blades into t
Blackground
The girls of the oldland come now and again*

The tzigany dancing with his father:
 They spin into the sick sun spinning and spinning:
 Once: the family stole horses they say:
 From all the bloodherds of the great plains they stole
 Now no more:

The horses driven from the hills:
 His father heading down the lead stallion:
 And driving hard.

11

My father kneeling in the weeds
 Praying for the croplands in the mudwaters:

We moved into the marshes: sandbagging the bottomlands.
 Beyond our boots: the river went down bottomless.
 My father's feet balancing on the necks of broken bottles.

Good Friday is into the flooded fields
 The floe ice smokes and runs like fires:
 Spring pours into the valley: the lavaflow:
 The dogwood scabbed into the sky
 The wind washingout the longknife stab.

Once: we found the deadman in this marsh
 The flesh was black: the blood was March:
 The sixmonths snow burrowed in the bones
 They nested together like a whiteclutch of birds.

The suckling pigs are put into a special pen
 The .30 caliber blastingout the small brainpan
 They can stick any soul on the head of a pin they say:

The body of sometime last summertime:
 The wormholes: and the snows.

My father kneeling in the weeds:

My brother with the frozenback: bagging up the water

And always:

We moved into the marshes.

III

vae victus

The sixty minutes of my soul:

The hour is here:

*In this moment the minutes lay like miles along the longitude
of my mind's geography: I will walk for miles into any mirror*

I am an ear listening for the sound of us:

I am an eye watching for all the other eyes:

*I am a tongue trying to say what has been said so often
before*

And what has never been said even once before.

There is something on the tip of my thoughts:

As small as sand: as vast as the spreading deserts.

Something is rolling around inside like a BB shot

It is not a BB shot or any kind of ball at all unless

It is the earth

Spun into my brain like a bloodblister.

My mind is full of answers: I look now for the questions

A cube of sugar in a boiling sea.

We will go blind from the blast furnaces

And the flash of faraway suns.

*There is a school of strange fish swimming in behind my
eyes:*

he weeds come stiffly over Niagara: headdown
 he sun will blot them bloat: the sandgrains
 e will grind them into the ground when we move:
 ur roar is the force of the runaway moons.
 here is no holding us.
 e have the power to move all the old mountains
 ll the miles and miles of them.

VII

he old man asks for something to smoke
 e are here for a time: all of us
 waiting for the trains out and the coming of the sun:
 he roadbeds are washing away by the day
 had a brother working concrete on the Boulder Dam
 ig shoulders: like the back of a bull
 hat the hell
 he pay was good
 here were the girls for awhile:
 never seen the dam finished:
 read it in the papers:
 esus: it will be another hot one today
 will fry the tail off a tadpole:
 he sheets will stick like tape this afternoon
 he fan on the chair in the sweating bedroom
 lowing the houseflies around like cinderbits:
 he cabdriver blows out his match and goes back to the
 coffee
 he voice will run from the radio like coolwater:
 lowing: gurgling into the stillswamp of the room
 hat belongs to the flies afterall:

*The nylons hanging not drying over the sink:
The airwick bottle on the shelf
Somewhere in the sixth inning the slowsleep
Will come out of the fanmotor: the gurgling
The papershades with the death rattles:
All: against the rusted screens:*

*They can wash the streets down:
They can scrub lastnight down into the sewers.*

IX

*These things have been seen in this land
Some of them not for the lasttime:*

*A goldfish trying hard to swim
While nailed high on a whitewashed wall
A threeheaded dog with a rosary
Constantly mispronouncing mea culpa:*

*There was a grocer hereabouts who painted
Stones and sold them for potatoes
But they came one day and closed him up
And his wife has moved to another town.
The storefront is all changed and sells ceramics now:*

*There was also a Rumanian man named Roman
And everybody called him Uncle Christmas:
He was always making wine from spoiling fruits
And he kept it in many bottles: milk bottles.
He worked on a dropforge in the foundry
Until he passedout one day from rupture and the heat:
They operated and fixed him up for the shipping departmen
And notmuch lifting: but he was never the same:
His wife remembers that he even started in smoking the
And he was fifty-six years and had never smoked before:*

He made a lot of wine before he finally went back to work:
His wife doesn't know why: he stopped drinking altogether.

They buried him a little ways from my grandmother:
Everytime we go out to see them we stop on the way back
and drink Uncle's oldcountry homebrew and talk Rumanian

to his oldcountry wife
and we always fix the mamaliga for her.

XII

In the gravel-pit my father came for me
His elbows in: his hands like the clawhammers:

This is all part of being a man he said
First for Christsake move around out of the sun
so it don't put out your eyes: I want you to see this:

Our father father of waters father of his country
Old man river too first in war and first in peace
The old man hit me like an axe
You damnwell stop that dreaming now
The ear was shattered this I know
From this day forward the earthsound the sounds of earth
are backward all backward.

You bastardsonofabitch I said
That's more like it the old man said that's the way to
Talk to your father: the tongue you talk now is the way
Your mother will be proud of you
She wants you being strong: strong man don't she
He hit me again: come on you pup you goddam girl
I will make your mother proud of you: come on
You beautiful sonofabitch
She wants you for a man she wants.

*He moved on me: the foamingherd of horses
The hooves of redmountainflesh rode me down hard
One leg bent higher than the rest then came crashing
Into my bowels.*

I remember him screaming: you son of a whore.

XIV

*Still: they will keep the soldiers mounting guard
In the square: the alley cats crawl the catafalque
The mouthhairs on the bayonets:
A millenium is in the measuring here
The exact question is: how large is this largeness?
Concretely: the memorial mixingbuckets and the medals:
The medic's eyes big as golfballs behind the GI glasses
Stick in the sulfanilamide as well mac
The wholeworks fits nicely into a man's mattress cover.*

*All this is mentioned in the manual: in a way
The boys are separate from the men: at this distance
It is difficult to know one pile from another
Something has been proved: the spring air is charged
With the proving
There are many whose mathematics will begin at St. Lo.*

*Euclid hangs by a single helmetstrap
Three .30 calibers triangulate in all the postulates
If they shootout your eyes you may never see the answer
They arrived at:*

*It will be a goodtime to call in the domesticcats
The evaluation comes due overdue
Part of the whole lies overseas
Factored out by the planegeometry of certain birds:
The birds were bad for haulingaway all the neststuff*

*he cats simply do not live that way: they will do better
ou can see it in their eyes:*

*here is tomorrow floating in the drainageditch:
waits in the thickwater: the water is a scab over the
ld scars: shortly: they will come for it
nd wash it off and wipe it off and lick it down and then
will be as good as it ever could be: there will be
o trouble with it
uts can swim you know: they will introduce it all around.*

*he face will only look familiar: what did they say the
ame was: the youngmen will size it up fast
nd be on the make right under your eyes:
am new here: if it is acceptable I will stay.*

*he mousing will be good here
ou can feel it in the air.*

JOSEPHINE HERBST

HUNTER OF DOVES

The man had vanished. He was dead. Now he seemed in peril of a double death for the work that should have left his image clear was to be, it seemed, the exact medium that would forever blur him. His time, the elements in which he had had his chance, was already hopelessly muddled. The past had become the inglorious present and with it, her friend and his intention. Mrs. Heath, who had been the dead man's friend in life, did not want any share in this betrayal. The danger was that no one intended to betray. There was nothing in the ingenuous face of the young man seated on the terrace of her house in the country to indicate that. His was a mute expression of rapt interest, of devotion to the dead man and his works. The expression even implied rites of purification and announced himself as the true Gabriel who would trumpet forth the connection between the dead man, Alec Barber, and the living works of the dead author, Noel Bartram.

It was no secret that Barber had taken the name of Bartram. The cipher concealed a further enigma, not so well known, hiding the actual difficult name of his birth. So her friend had triply buried himself and behind his several masks had slipped on the final mask that dying bestowed.

She tried to focus on the visitor. Surely, he was *too* youthful. He must have been a mere brat in the 'thirties when Noel Bartram was writing the three short novels that were the sum of his art. Youth was well and good, but did it not seek first of all to serve itself? Their eyes — were they actually truthful or only self-consciously determined to look trusting? They gazed at her with almost embarrassing steadiness, offering all, and made her feel infantile, too trusting herself, as she had felt long ago when she held tightly to the hand of her father who was gravely interpreting the expression in the melting eyes of

great dog. « See, he wants to speak, » her father had said, and she had placed her own hand on the creature's head, pressing the bony structure beneath the mat of hair. What had the dog been imploring so earnestly? Surely for more than a bone. That her mind was running to doggy analogies made her lips twitch in a jerk of a smile and she brought her hand up to her mouth roughly to rub away the threat. For all his angelic appearance, the young man on the terrace was a gravedigger. But there would be no earthen pots, no beads, no beautiful masks for the feast of the dead, no solemn ceremonies with stately folds to give off definite pungent clues to former existence. No, for her friend there would be nothing but a rag bag of recollections culled from a medley of individuals, some of whom had barely had a speaking acquaintance with the dead man and who now waxed loquacious simply because they scented a chance to get their own names in print. The huge sheaf of notes on the young man's knee testified to his industry, but to what else? Were they more than rags, to be pinned to her friend's tree of life, to flutter in the wind and even to conceal the branches and the fruit?

The vision of an actual tree was suddenly so strong that Mrs. Heath seemed to see it, with all its quivering leaves, and her dead friend stepping softly around it and past it, headed for some high grassed meadow, in his old trousers deliberately shabby for the hunt, weaving his long legs through the tobacco- and rust-colored tufts, the dead whistles shaking stiff purplish manes, the milkweed pods bursting to fatten another summer, and the man himself, with gun slanted, and his dog — ah, always a dog — after the elusive bird that was forever on the wing.

Noel Bartram had been a poor hunter, until the very last, when he went after and brought down doves.

Would she be able to make the young man on the terrace with his sweet-scented name — Timothy Comfort — realize the importance of the doves? Not deer, not even rabbits, but *doves*. And whatever had become of the bookplate she had made for Noel, fashioned in a fine Spencerian tradition, with elegant whirls within whirls spiraling away from his initials, N. B., cunningly contrived within a mask, and the doves all finely drawn and on the wing, dipping and soaring toward the four corners of the winds? Possibly his sister, Nora, now had it, locked away in a secret drawer, though she might very well use it for her own. Who else had a greater right? The tall, slim creature, with the birdlike head, might have been his twin. She had even married a man with a last name beginning with a B, as if to say, as I am, so shall I ever be. And her husband, Joel Baker, had been Noel's friend in college. His inseparable friend.

If Timothy Comfort had any idea of the importance of Nora as a

clue to Noel, he did not show it. He was fatuously pleased to be enmeshed with the Baker pair. They had blessed his enterprise with a list of names, many of them glamorous, and some of the reflections from the glossier reputations seemed to have gilded the young man himself. He sat in a glow that was positively a little feverish, certain of his ability to interpret the dead man's work in the proper spirit. A definitive edition of the three novels was to come out in an omnibus and it did seem odd that, of all people to undertake the task, Timothy Comfort, who had never written a line for publication, should have been given the privilege of writing an introduction. For a brief second it seemed almost sinister.

Writing was not Mrs. Heath's medium. She had to think of the situation in her own terms and she could not imagine turning an unfamiliar into Klee's studio, for instance, and expecting such a person, however well intentioned, to make anything of the table littered with shells, a skate's egg, bits of dried moss, a piece of coral, fragments of textiles. The inner watching that was the core of Klee's work would be concealed from such an eye, no matter how electrically awake. The inner necessity that was the way out for Klee, needed inner watching to detect, and a gift, yes, a gift was also needed for detection. One should not approach the ark with the intention to riffle for one's own glory. That led to nothing except the rough smashing of the ancient vase to find the hidden gold bracelet. And for another moment, she looked at the innocent young man, gloomily, as she hoped she would have looked at Cortez had she been an Aztec with the prescience to foresee the intention behind that white-god smile.

Timothy Comfort was speaking. Not of Noel Bartram, she realized but of himself. It almost seemed that he intended to lead her on by confiding his own secrets, and by spilling them out, unhand her. But again, he might be just another tiresome young man, pinned, as they all seemed to be, like dead butterflies to their own tedious histories. There seemed so little honeycomb to most of them, and at the image of honeycomb a terrible nostalgia for all the richness that living could impart made her want to shake the young intruder out of his self-satisfied preoccupation. Not that it had the appearance of self-satisfaction. For he was going into his own immediate past, dressing it up with a sort of anguish, trying to make himself appear a suitable counterpart to the anguished persons in Noel Bartram's fiction. Persons? *Were* they persons? In memory no individual stood out from Noel Bartram's novels, no Madame Bovary and no Julien Sorel. But it would be more to the point to ask if there was even an Underground Man, for, of all writers, Dostoevsky, had been Noel's great obsession. But the underground man of Dostoevsky's story had an entity so real that though she could not remember if he had even been given a name, she could

el all too vividly his agitation, his frustration and despair. No one person in Noel's works had so alarming an identity. In a sense, he had used masks of persons, and in somewhat the same way that the painter Ensor had used them. Sometimes Ensor used a mask as a still life and so did Bartram. But what Ensor did that was distinctive was to emphasize the mask in its temporary and dangling detachment from man, killing the actor and giving life to the mask. Masks superseded their wearers and virtually had a life of their own and in giving them such a life, Ensor seemed to recapture the transfigured spirit in which masks were regarded by primitive tribes. The inanimate mask became more vivid than the shadow-person and in thinking this, Mrs. Heath found herself wondering at the connection between Ensor and those Italian painters who replaced kings with cabbages as rulers of a world of dreams.

And just what or who had ruled the Bartram dream world? For his created world had the nightmare quality of an intense dream.

Even his animals had goblin natures. The fighting cock denuded its feathers with one eye banging like a bloody button against the stained, struggling satin vest of a dying matador. The donkey with only one ear and that one perked stiff as a tin trumpet. The malicious parrot and its eternal seed-dropping, as sinister as the drip of icy water on some chained victim in a dank dungeon. As for his people, did one remember the girl with the wooden leg or only her leg, its cork covered with a fine silk stocking? It was Mr. Matucchi's shoes that haunted you, concealing with their elegance, bunions and broken laces. Oh, oh, what a procession winding toward some Calvary!

Now Timothy Comfort had folded up his own story, tucked it neatly, one might say, into some pocket, like a handkerchief. The edges barely stuck out. The war, yes, of course, the war had got him down. A marriage; it had already gone on the rocks. But he seemed to be involved with a Number Two, if one could judge by a secretive smile, delicious to see, and a reference, offhand, to someone called Ann. Ann had wanted dreadfully to meet her. Ann was a great friend of Mrs. Talbot's and it was Mrs. Talbot who had introduced him to Joel Bartram's work with so shattering an effect that he could not rest until he had persuaded Bartram's publishers to revive the novels, that, since the man was dead, were beginning to make a noise. Not that they had not had an underground reputation for years among those in the know » but now it was time for them to get a wider airing. Of course, Joel Baker held the key. As a friend, a brother-in-law and literary executor, nothing could be accomplished without him. He had been helpful, up to a point. Timothy's chin sank into his collar thoughtfully and Mrs. Heath, determined to steer clear of talk about the Bakers, tacked briskly with, « I wish Bessie Talbot would give

me back my book.» She frowned into her glass, now drained of a weak bourbon, and found herself very nearly angry with Bessie Talbot. «She took it right off my shelves. That's the way books disappear.»

Timothy Comfort laughed outright. He gave himself up to it; you could see laughter rippling through his body, under his clothes. His look was compassionate and humorous and once again she had the amazing sensation of feeling childlike, confiding and almost putty. «After seeing all those people,» she muttered crossly, irritated that she had almost been swept into confidence by nothing more substantial than youthful charm, «I don't see what I can add.»

«Oh, but everything,» said Timothy Comfort, and she had to admit the boy had a pleasing voice. «Everything. I left you toward the last on purpose. I wanted to get rid of the trivia first. One can't neglect anything.»

«I don't see why not,» said Mrs. Heath. «I see you've got Parker Grainger on your list. In my opinion, you could very well neglect him, with profit.»

«So I found out,» and once more the young man seemed to embrace her as he smiled. «I doubt if he is ever sober long enough to accumulate a memory. He had anecdotes but I had the feeling that they were like those stories soldiers bring back from the war, something that happened to someone else. In fact, I trapped him in just such a fib. He tried to palm off a tale about himself and Bartram driving a droshky down Broadway at two a. m. I finally tracked it down to Bob Colt and a trumpet-player who had used the vehicle to transport records. Bartram wasn't even there.»

«There you are,» cried Mrs. Heath. «Nothing is reliable except the work. People either want to read or they don't. You can find Noel Bartram, perhaps more than you like, right there, in his novels, if you take the trouble. Or have the sense. The intuitive sense,» she added in a threatening mutter.

He wasn't offended. Far from it. He leaned toward her sadly with so appealing a confidence that she almost feared he intended to lay his head upon her breast. She drew back stiffly and put on a stern expression. For a second it was so still that the murmur of the brook over stones was clear as a bird's trill. Timothy's head had dropped and when he lifted it, he had the orphaned look of his generation. His eyes seemed to implore her not to block the path that he was seeking toward some homeland. Don't be a crow trying to steal robins' eggs; help me to hatch them and to fly.

How difficult it was. She put her hand, helplessly, before her eyes. And how thrilling. And brought the hand down abruptly with a warm smile. Wasn't there some way to make this boy feel the amazing texture,

the complication, so that he would not fall for the appearance of things? To listen, instead, for the moment of silence when the bird spoke. But the young were in such a hurry, such a panic. Back they tripped into the past, looking for the glossy hillside, the striped awning, the champagne bucket. Reading Scott Fitzgerald like a bible; fancying the lost 'twenties had been one long round of pleasure; desperadoes, dancing at the Ritz, playing tennis along the Riviera; driving a high-powered car with maddening speed and one arm around a beautiful damned girl. There was something about Timothy Comfort's well-made clothes and the neatness of his really good tie that disheartened her in the same way that she had been dampened by Noel Bartram's Brooks Brothers suits. In her young days — also in the 'twenties, but oh, how different from the legend — all that had seemed less important. Though, of course, she had to admit that it was easier then to get to Paris on a shoestring.

« I realize my limitations, » Timothy said in a subdued voice. « That's why I need your help so much. I really do. » And once more, he seemed about to cast himself upon her like some lost child. « But why, why? » she heard herself answer; hypocritically, really, for of course she knew why. He did need help. Even an Etruscan tomb needs a guide to the prancing horsemen. And at least she might keep him from a magnetized glare upon the Paris phase of Bartram's life that had been little more than a kindergarten for what had followed. But all these young people hummed and buzzed about the 'twenties and Paris. You might think the period had been the garden spot of creation instead of the anteroom to horror.

« When I read your letters to Bartram, » said Timothy, in the tone of voice that implied a compliment, « I knew you could tell me more of what I needed to know than anyone else. Not counting his sister or Joel Baker, of course. » Mrs. Heath felt her cheeks burning with a flame of resentment but she laughed it off, with a snort and an abrupt gesture that might have been a restrained slap. « I should think I might have been consulted before my letters were handed around. Who was so liberal as to give them to you? »

« They were among his papers. Nora gave me a big bundle of letters to him. Almost everything he had kept except letters from his wife, and from what I know of him, I am certain he must have written her and she to him, even though they both lived in Hollywood those last years. Of course, his to her would be better. But there wasn't a trace of them, Nora said. » The way he put it made it fairly certain that there had been letters, stacks of them, and that Timothy knew it.

« But he was married for a year before the end. Do you think he wrote his wife then, even though they lived in the same house? »

« He might have, and anyhow he must have written her in the year before they married, even though they were in the same town. Why, you know he did. I know I do. I have, I mean. Write letters. You fall in love and if you are a writer, and perhaps freer writing than you would be in speech, or at any rate more egotistic about it, sort of congratulating yourself on the turn of a phrase, you simply write notes, you have to. It's one way to break through. Get in, you know. » From a certain desperate tension around his mouth, Mrs. Heath knew that he did know what he was talking about and she looked at him with genuine interest.

« Yes, » she said. « Yes. But if it comes to letters, I should think the ones that would be most important would be the letters he must have written his sister. What about them? »

« Oh, those, » and Timothy waved his hand in a futile gesture. « Wherever they are, I haven't seen them and probably won't. Nora has them, I suppose, unless she has burned them. »

« You think she has burned them? »

« Why not? Wouldn't you? »

« Don't ask me, » said Mrs. Heath. « I'm a hoarder. My attic is filled with letters. There's something primitive about it; like ancient peoples who saved parings of nails, bits of hair, as though these fragments had power over the soul. All those letters, penned up, like so many pigeons, cooing, screaming, why do I keep them? Perhaps I am hoping that time will exhaust them and when I come to look at them again, they will be little more than the pearly skeletons of something I had loved. »

« But you haven't a Joel Baker in the house, » said Timothy, shrewdly.

« No, » said Mrs. Heath. « I haven't a Joel Baker. »

There was a long silence. « What are you thinking? » asked Timothy, leaning toward her with an ingratiating smile that implied they had been thinking the same thought.

« I wasn't thinking, » said Mrs. Heath. « I was seeing. I was seeing Joel Baker in the elevator, late at night, in that hotel where Noel had an apartment on the top floor. I knew the Bakers lived in the same hotel but I had never met either of them. Going up late one night, I saw this man standing in the elevator, with a dog, a big-muzzled dog with a handsome beard, and the man shrunk back into a corner, aloof and apart, apart from himself, you might say, simply cut off from the world. He had the dog on a leash, and, in a sense, he had himself on a leash. There might have been three of them in the place, not two. I knew it was Baker; I recognized the dog that had once been in Bartram's place when I was there. The man stood so far away,

though he was only two feet from me, his aloof face as haughty as something engraven on an old tomb. I don't know why I liked him, instantaneously, but I did. Not a handsome face, but oddly ugly, implying a kind of central intensity that is, for me, the greatest attraction there is. But then they all had it — Baker, Nora and Bartram. I looked at him but he didn't deign to look at me, that is, not directly. Out of a corner of his eye, he was sort of sizing me up. And I liked that, too; anything is better than being ignored. Without curiosity, what are we? Mere muffins. »

« You see? » Timothy almost crowed. « Now you are vindicating all my own curiosity about Bartram. Aren't you? And you *will* help? »

He had her there; she had to admit it. At the same time, she had no notion how ably the young man might use a gratified curiosity. There was something about him that made him seem altogether inappropriate for the task. Was that, perhaps, the very reason that he had been given the privilege; so that he might fail?

« I don't know that I believe in all this goring and prying. You can see all there is to see in Van Gogh's painting; it wasn't necessary to broadcast the fact that he cut off one of his own ears. »

« Then you think that Bartram... »

« No, I don't, » snapped Mrs. Heath, getting to her feet and brushing wholly imaginary crumbs from her lap. « Noel Bartram was as sane a man as you will ever meet. You'd know, if you had ever laid eyes on him. He had a difficult, tortuous underground life; it's all there in his work; in a nightmare world. In a way, he was writing an American journey into a Siberia of the human spirit. His people, if you can call them that, were lopped-off criminals or impaled saints. Exiles, everyone of them. Surrounded, moreover, by crucified animals. But if you think he was cracked, or, for that matter, a tough kind of character, you're wrong. He was very gentle, soft spoken. If he shot doves — he loved them. »

She was a little breathless and obscurely angry. « I don't know why I should go into this. I really don't. »

« I do, » said Timothy. « I need to know and you are the one to help me. I won't get anything from the Bakers, that's certain. Maybe I can't use what I discover. But I ought to know more than I do. It isn't as if I had ever met Bartram. »

« Perhaps it wouldn't have informed you if you had. Look at the mess of anecdotes you've picked up. Do they inform you? »

« No, » said Timothy. « Window dressing. »

« If I help you, it's Bartram I am helping. I loved the man. » And pacing a moment on the terrace energetically in what seemed to Timothy a most characteristic stride, she suddenly whirled on him and made a grimace. « There, I've caught you with that silly expression on your

face. Our imaginations are so limited, life so narrowed, that the second one uses the word love, the image of a bed leaps up. Don't deny it. It wasn't anything like that, not at all. For one thing I was married and to a man I adored. I'm not sure that Bartram didn't adore him too. It always seemed odd that after we separated, my husband and I, I never again saw Bartram with the same sense of ease.»

The young man had risen and now puckered his forehead with the evident intent to appear knowing. His mind was racing in the underbrush and a faint glow illuminated his face. He had the Noel Bartram look on an autumn day with haze over the valley and bright sunlight on the hills, the smell of burning brush pungent and sharp, and the spotted dog tense and silky with the shine of hope, his tail a divining rod that quivered delicately, feelingly as he moved, muzzle down. «Well,» she said, placing a hand on the young man's arm. «Think about it. And I'll give myself over to remembering a little and see what I bring up. Then we'll meet again. Or I'll write you. That might be best.»

«Think about the doves, for instance?» asked Timothy with the eagerness of one who hopes to please.

«Yes, the doves. An ancient bird. Not only the dove of the Holy Ghost and the Annunciation but that other dove, deeper back, primitive, urgent, the dove of Aphrodite.» She spoke the words softly as if she were using a brush and the best paint and had made a broad stroke that would not need to be defined further.

The young man let out a little whistling breath that was intended for comprehension but emerged as something inept and silly. What would he make of the thing? There was no knowing. When she thought of the Bakers, of their subtlety, cleverness and strength, young Timothy seemed little more than a tool who would take the wax and make the exact image that would best satisfy them. Them? No, they would be two separate entities, husband and wife, and their union would be in a jealous guarding of their secret.

As for the secret itself, its nature, its substance even, she was not one to rush in where angels fear to tread. So far as she was concerned, the age had turned silly with diagrams and pat answers. One needed not only intelligence, whittled to its finest point, but awe. The wounded bird might be brought down but sometimes got away along that dark track of the woods that led to nothing more than deeper darkness where the air whistled with the sighing of leaves and the needles of fir slipped under the feet like something waxy and alive, writhing out from under the heavy tread.

«And so, good-bye,» she said.

From the window she looked out at the road where the innocent boy was involved with his car. Now it slowly drove along, and she could

fairly see the expression on that too-open face. Puzzled, eager, gratified. And in some way kin to the cherubim tucked into the corner of an old painting. Obviously he had confidence in his heaven-sent mission. Would confidence prevail against Joel Baker? But why should she put such stress upon Joel Baker?

The darkness of the big room with its sharp cool contrast to the too-bright outdoors had plunged her into a gloomy wood where the shine of plates on the old dresser offered little more than childish consolations. What was she to make of Bartram when she had seemed so unfit to unravel or to solve the conundrum of her own life? This house was her ark but the dove was elsewhere. If it had sighted land, it had stayed on that green isle never to return. The demand to go backward in time brought its own violence and the image of Bartram was splintered to a hundred fragments among which her own head in a garnet velvet hat danced headless before her eyes. But the hat had nothing to do with Bartram. Why should it dance up, out of the unknown?

A sense of panic forced her to sit down coolly, to support her head on her hand and to tell herself this was not the way. One did not need the literal documentation for a painting. And the second she let her thoughts turn to painting, a balm entered her very blood, she was absolved from going back, step by step, bruising her feet over each separate stone. She might even learn from a canvas of her own where the little houses in the village across the Delaware appeared to be swimming in water and the river itself had the opacity of a black asphalt pavement. The years could not be recalled in their continuous sequence of day by day but were enclosed in a memory of a single sun-parched afternoon or some cool evening. In the smell of a spring hyacinth and the bitter bruise of purplish berries of the deadly nightshade. Was reality the teacup on the table or the light that fell in bars upon it from the shuttered window? And what light in Bartram's world had transformed love to represent everything that was not expressed?

When she thought of Bartram in his good clothes, driving a new car like a manic over back country roads or simply standing, the thoughtful host, before the wood fire in his country house, his voice gentle and his eyes watchful, she was almost exasperated for if one tried to get hold of him through his appearance, he was already leaping upstream over the falls like a salmon bent on its superior destiny.

And if one began with the fashionable practice of focusing on Bartram's mother as the progenitor of all that Bartram had become, what did one find? A large White Queen with a sweet tooth who longed to stuff her adored boy into acquiescence, but acquiescence for what? She had succeeded for a time and nothing is harder to forego than

success. Though Bartram always appeared as a man without a family except for his younger sister, who was too much like him, some softer shadow of his own nature, to be a part of a family pattern, he was nonetheless deeply imbedded in a great family connection. In the background were numerous cousins, uncles and energetic males who were hard business heads. As for his father, he had died competing valiantly with the hard business heads of the world and with incorruptible honesty had been broken by heads harder than his own. He had been a building contractor, and so strong is the power of suggestion, that Mrs. Heath could not now determine whether he had actually fallen from one of his own high constructions or only figuratively fallen or whether she had made some identification of him with the Master Builder or if the son had put such an idea into her head. Now in retrospect she seemed to see the man she had never laid eyes upon, in his own height and breadth, who must have had some of the son's shyness, alertness and gift of seeing. The energetic males of the family connection had taken over the son then returned from what must have appeared to them a shiftless indulgent year in Paris, and substituting for a father, had found a job for him, or « position » as the mother would have put it. With all their connections, it was certain that they would have a finger in real estate and in particular a good hotel and what more suitable in their minds than a young man like Bartram as manager.

Whether the mother intended the hotel as her son's sole future, Mrs. Heath could not say, but it represented security, that shackling iron which simply meant one is freed from necessity to become enslaved. It's true, Bartram did not have the appearance of a slave, the first day she set eyes upon him, and, at the suggestion of the literary doctor in New Jersey had stopped with her husband at the hotel to call out the young man whom the doctor had described as a gifted solitary in need of the companionship of his own kind. He did not even have the appearance of a solitary as he came out under the striped awning with such a proud step. She could remember herself instantaneously approving of him and leaning out of the car to take his hand, and she remembered the hand itself, unexpectedly large and firm, for his slenderness might have led one to expect one of those rather limp grasps that disturb you by an avowal of reticence.

If she might describe herself, it was that she had the gift for recognition and for unashamedly letting herself go when she instantaneously liked, and she had certainly liked Bartram. For one thing she had admired the appearance of the two tall young men, standing in such amiable understanding by the car; her husband, fair and with light hair shining as a helmet and Bartram, dark and sinewy, both soft voiced, communicating first simply out of a mutual feeling that they

were exiled from a beloved Paris, and later, communicating out of a sense of mutual betrayal of some earlier dream of a fairer world.

She had fairly snatched at the chance, she now realized, to rescue Bartram from the doldrums, and, when they were inside the hotel and she had admired the view from his penthouse apartment where he deprecated the big room and even the view as little more than a cage, where to see beyond rooftops merely enhanced his sense of being in jail, she listened with a growing impatience to his admission that he had been working on a novel for three years with a trepidation that it would never be finished. He was already tempering his admission with a reluctant confession of his weaknesses, saying that if he intended to write, he should be able to do it, even here. But the truth was that the hotel and all its occupants surrounded him with the felt mat of a persistent presence. If he were alone in his privacy, the 'phone might ring, calling him below. One had no idea, he had pleaded, pleading for himself, the nature of the interruptions. He was the guardian of the hotel, its keeper, its jailor. A hotel like this was jam-packed with broken hearts, broken pocketbooks, too, and as the hotel was a genteel one, with a gilding upon it, one could imagine the pride of the victims who, finding themselves slowly drained of their substance, tried to keep up a front, sallied past the door, hummed, pretended lighthearted gaiety, delay of checks from rich uncles, alimony, or the imaginary sale of imaginary real estate that would put them on easy street. Of course, there were solid characters too, mostly dull, heavily respectable, who never got drunk, or leaned too far out of windows and who never brought in riotous companions to cause old lady guests to knock on the walls and finally to 'phone irritated blasts to the office. What was needed in his situation was a hard head, he averred, and didn't a hard head intimate a hard heart?

His preoccupation with the fallen element of his clientele certainly prepared her for his own work when she finally came to it. Even in conversation, he gave to the object of dislike all the attentiveness one gives to love. She could hardly believe that the four walls of this narrow building could compress so much treachery and suffering and that the occupants, some of whom she had encountered in the elevator, could really be the gargoyles of human existence that he described. But the fact that he saw them as such interested her profoundly, implying a sensitivity whose secret she longed to explore. She listened to him with the feeling that in him hate-attractions were more powerful than love and through them there was a constant wedding of fears and the betrothal of secret desires. There was such a contradiction, too, between what he appeared to be and what he undoubtedly was or combatted deep down in his secret soul as to make him simply irresistible. She had to know. She had to. And reckless as she always was when once

she felt the impact of her own imperious desires, she had no hesitation in telling him, flat-footedly, that he owed it to himself to finish the book, not at some future time, but *now*, and that if he did not, he would forever have it dangling in his inner consciousness, an awkward corpse, whose deathly presence would putrefy his entire life. The only alternative would be forever to forego writing at all; simply to chloroform the impulse, now, and remove the dead beast to a place of decent burial. Then, at least, he could go on living. « And never think, » she had said, getting to her feet and pacing up and down, « that life itself isn't important. Not just the literary life, but life, out of which all the rest springs. »

He had agreed with her, his cheekbones flushing, and, opening another bottle with a fine bravado had poured generously. When the 'phone rang and some voice from the office had squeaked, he had shut the thing off with a disregard for consequences that was wonderful.

She remembered the sun pouring over the broken building tops into the big room with its disarming appearance of quiet comfort, the chintz-covered sofas and chairs so deceptively like those found in easeful homes whose windows looked out upon broad lawns. She remembered the enchantment that the three of them felt in their new-found acquaintanceship with its links into a past held in high romantic blissful suspense and the bond between them of their commitment to an arduous future of uncertain reward. They were gilded, the three of them, by their high hopes and by the vision of their dedication. And that very vision compelled them to confront the world as it truly was, and to balance their chances with the circumstances.

He had no idea that his book would sell, he modestly stated, and for that very fact was the more compelled to complete it. It gave defiance to his fate as his relatives and soft-hearted mother conceived it. That he needed defiance was only too clear to Mrs. Heath; she was not deceived by his gentleness, and when he finally abruptly proposed to call up the office and to tell them he had to go out of town for a few days — on a business trip, if necessary — she was second only to her husband to rush to him and shake him by the hand quite as though he had won the Irish sweepstakes.

The flurry of departure was as blissful, as expectantly happy, as though they had been about to board some liner to sail for ultimate seas. With her eager eye for detail, she had noted everything, the fine leather bag dragged from a closet, the extra pair of shoes with the burnish of precious wood. Ah, she thought, with amusement, with some patronizing too, he is a dandy. And when he finally emerged from an inner room clad in a shapeless old suit, wearing upon his head a battered hat and carrying — of all things — a gun, she felt she was suddenly confronting him in the rôle of a gentleman with a landed

estate who permits himself shooting in order to feel the squire. Well, it was the hunting season, the delirious fall of the year, and might not this passion, if such it were, be as rightfully indulged as her husband's obsession with boats and sailing?

It was an unfortunate thought for it immediately burdened her with anxiety for the two of them. Seeing them, side by side, trying to squeeze a bottle of Scotch into an already bursting bag — but bursting with what and for how long a pilgrimage? — she admitted to herself that there was a slyness in her intention toward Bartram, and that full encouragement to him was one way to fan the flame for her husband's own work, so neglected, and for reasons so obscure, so tortured and even malign, that to confront his typewriter now so often littered with penciled designs of sloops, ketches, and barges, that were to carry him where? was to admit a dizziness such as one feels standing on the brink of an abyss. Moments like this, so pangful, so alive with a terrible dread and a fierce combatting hope, were surely the great moments of resolution in one's existence. More than the two men, she was aware of the three of them and of the burden that their individual talents laid upon them, and that this was the trembling moment for some advance or deathly retreat. And she permitted herself that trifling attention to detail which so often conceals the larger anxiety by asking Bartram if he had remembered to bring along his manuscript, for wouldn't it be a good idea if he could read it to them and thus wind himself up for what ought to be its conclusion?

He had looked up in surprise that she had imagined he had not thought of *that*, first of all, and patting the bag, in appearance like some sleek animal, trained to fetch and carry, said that the thing was right at the bottom, the first item to go in. They had trooped out, and as she went through the door she noted a pair of long black suède gloves, one draped on the arm of a chair and one dropped to the floor with its fingers lightly spread as though to break a fall. The black gloves and her image of the probable woman who had dropped them filled her painter's mind with thoughts of a possible Toulouse-Lautrec female. In the elevator she had idly begun to talk about the French painter, the hunchback, who had illuminated the underworld of flesh, sinned against and sinful, with the gloss of galantry and decaying desire. Bartram had picked up the theme, eagerly, expostulating that an artist in this country was seldom allowed to earn money in the playful manner of the Toulouse-Lautrec posters. They had gone on talking for miles of road, burnished with the late afternoon autumn light, as she quietly brooded between the two young men, hearing and not hearing, now deciding what to have for dinner, now wondering about Bartram and if he were in love and who had worn the gloves and had dropped them with so evident an intent to return.

When they came to the long hill that swooped down to the Delaware, they had stopped the car for a good look. Bartram let out a sigh as quail rose from the brush near the road and fluttered backward through the dying goldenrod. His eyes clicked and sparked as he chanted an ode to autumn, the perfect season. Wasn't it Pushkin, the first of the Russians and the last of the whole men, who could create only in autumn, the rioting season of the heart? « And didn't he die in autumn, too? » Heath wondered.

Bartram wasn't sure of that. « But if he didn't, he should have. A man should die in his favorite season with all the pangs of it in him. I'm not sure it wasn't autumn. Shot in a dirty duel for a woman. It reeks, looked at in one way, but looked at in another, damned fitting. »

The words might once more have been spoken. She could hear the tone of the voices in the car and smell the fires of burning brush in a far-off field. In agitation, she began to pace the floor, torn up once more by a vanished past. What a hateful young man, Timothy Comfort, who so lightheartedly and for his own selfish purposes came stirring and digging, roiling up the soil on the grassy mounds. What could he ever know of it all? What could she tell? How little seeped through of the real agonies. And not just their agonies, but all the miseries of spirits thought too small for anything but petty concerns. This house had been some little oasis on that autumn night with the fires burning bright. And so brightly had the thing been that it glowed now in retrospect. The pang of retrospect. For Bartram was dead and Heath — where was he? A wanderer, who in her thoughts was closer to the River Styx than to his own bright shore of life. And this brash young man, this stripling, this Timothy Comfort who was no comfort, had invited her to call back the actual dead and the living dead, for how extricate one memory without the other? She was no filing cabinet, neatly documented, but a living soul, who had been abandoned in Arcadia by the two of them.

Here they had sat breathlessly while Bartram had read his book and had taken fully the first long intent silence that greeted its close as a genuine reward. Perhaps the most genuine he was ever to get. For that work was fated to drop almost as soundlessly as a stone into water. The circle of approval was so tiny and from writers like himself as yet unacknowledged. She had foreseen all that, the first evening, with a tightening of the throat; an anxiety and a dread that he might lose heart before he was done. Or was it of her husband that she had been thinking and had merely transplanted the anxiety for one to the other? Certainly they were together all that fall so much that the household became bewitched with their intermingled presences.

Bartram had taken a room in an old hotel across the river and in

spite of the telegrams and imprecations from his mother, his uncle and the chorus of relatives who would fete him for a solid business character if they could, he stayed on and he finished it. Yes, he finished it. The corpse came to life and walked. Take up thy burden, Lazarus. And on the afternoon of the day, punch drunk, he had gone out with his gun and an old dog belonging to the hotelkeeper, and had shot a pheasant. After a long cold afternoon, he had brought the bird down, the first he had ever brought down in his life. He confessed it. The man in the old hunting hat, with the gun, confessed that the rôle had come before the act. It was a dreadful bird to cook for it was filled with buckshot. In his excitement he had continued to pump in the lead. They had rushed to town, the two of them, Heath and Bartram, for wine, and the bird came out of the oven beautiful to see but difficult to eat. If it had only been possible to swallow the shot! They laughed it off, exclaiming at the sweet flesh, disdaining the bitter pills, while Bartram sat, a little abashed, stirring the mound of shot on his plate absently with his fork, turning the pellets over and scattering them with a rattle among the bones.

Of what were they all thinking in the silence that often fell during that last meal before Bartram returned to town? If there was a glow upon them, there was sadness, different for each. Unquestionably Heath must also have suffered chagrin beneath the genuine joy he felt for his friend. The fatality of his own self-reproach was beginning to mount and for obscure reasons burst out wildly all that fall. Bartram's achievement seemed to gear him for work one minute and the next to stall him in complete futility. The fall of the year that had entered so auspiciously floundered and bled.

Even a bird blundered. They could hear the hollow taps against the attic rafters, the frantic rush of something, but what? How the old superstitions brooded in the house that fall! Their hearts pounded as they stealthily opened the attic door. Was it a robber? A ghost? And the bird, wild with fright, flew in their faces, beating its wings, knocking its head against an old trunk, and, retreating to the dark eaves, sat cowering. When they approached with her apron to throw over its head, it rose high to the peak of the roof, knocking feathers down. Softly one fell upon her shoulder. Silly thing, silly thing, she called, but the silly thing glared wildly and tossed itself in delirium from one end of the dark attic to the other. Heath got the window open and they both flapped their arms and the bird shot out, straight as an arrow. They could watch it, circling high in the sky.

They were quiet afterwards; downstairs by the fire they sat quiet and apart. Something alive had gone out of the house and was in the sky. Their hearts felt empty; without a word, they knew it. They admitted it, secretly, and the secret was a loud noise in the room. The messenger

had come and gone clapping the news loud as a bell. What was it, oh what was it? Where had the emptiness begun?

She blamed him. If he would only work. If he would only try. If he would only stop drawing ships. If he would only saw wood, just to exercise his muscles. If he would only not take to heart his stupid father and his father's deathly reproaches that he was not making a fat living, was not keeping his wife as a man should. She had never wanted to be kept. No, she had wanted to be in a house where her man was allowed to be himself. But who was Heath? Had she known? Had she foisted upon him a too-bright expectation? What was wrong, oh, what was wrong? Money, that was too simple. Not just money of the lack of it. For it was the 'thirties and dollars did not grow on bushes for anyone. And how was it that since the advent of Bartram, the pattern had somehow broken? Bartram, Bartram, yes, Bartram had finished his book. He had even shot his bird. Bartram. And they could not get loose from Bartram. They were writing back and forth or going to the city and staying at Bartram's hotel and now Bartram's book was going to be published in the spring, and Bartram himself was preparing to make the grand cut, and snip off the hotel with his big family connection and even with that holy cow, security. Bartram was going to take a chance. And had she rubbed it in, slyly, perhaps, but rubbed it in, nonetheless? Probably; yes, certainly. For no exasperation is more powerful than the one of baffled love that cannot love as once it did.

And where was the Heath she had known? Sunk in a deep dream of boats, rivers, talking of a ship that would sail around the world. She would even make believe that she wanted the ship; they would sit side by side, studying his sketches of the ideal boat. She would nod her head, her insides bleeding with the thought that it must be only in a fable that they could be together. Oh, we are being babes in the woods! And at night she would feel so done in by the day, so gone, so lost, so far away, and then once in sleep she had the dream, the delicious dream of a joyful moment, and it seemed to her that she was standing by her kitchen window looking out upon a garden filled with flowers and someone came softly behind her. She could feel a man standing behind her with his arms lightly pressing her shoulders, then he was touching her ears and he was putting earrings into her ears. Surprise, surprise, and the rush of joyful surprise, of desire, how lovely, and turning, whom did she expect? Heath? But in the dream it wasn't Heath. It was Bartram. She woke and lay quiet with Heath beside her. Why Bartram? And she furiously denied that she was in love with Bartram or wanted Bartram. No, it was something else she longed for. The old joy. She wanted to want Heath, the early confident

Heath. Her own husband. Not this man, absorbed in some dream of boats, stalemated on a becalmed sea and yet obsessed with sailing, in deep need of the swift breeze. And to feel so helpless, no longer able to be the breeze, to perform the miracle. But who was really himself that fall and winter? The world was dazed for it was the time of droughts, foreclosures and despairs. Time for divorce, too, for among their friends, this was the season.

Even Bartram. Especially Bartram. For Bartram's triumph over his lethargy, Bartram's entry into his own real world, cut him off from some source. His family did not matter, his mother's great soft mutterings did not matter. But his sister, that mattered, and in some curious, involved way he was no longer the solid friend of her husband, but a rival. Oh, a most modest rival for it was a bore to most of their friends, Bartram's admiration of his brother-in-law's witty works. Bartram was always quoting Baker. He might have been his younger brother for all that they were practically the same age.

It was from the north window of this very room that she had looked out that December day to an amazed view of Bartram, in his old suit, wearing his battered hat and trailing a gun, walking toward the house over tufts of wintry grass gashed with the bruises of ice and snow. She had been alone and blissfully working with a new-found hopefulness that was precariously based on what might well be someone's doom. For Heath had been called home, out to Chicago, to a father who was desperately ill and might be dying; might also turn human, at last, and in his softened state, new-found milk of comprehension might flood his veins. She had started up at the sight of Bartram, not too grateful, and with a certain shyness, for his quick approach to the house, silently made and unannounced, was as direct as in her dream when he had stolen behind her and she had felt the pressure of his arms.

But his face had not been the face of her dream. It was darkened with trouble, saturated with unshed tears. He had been so absorbed that he sat with his hat on, his gun protectively balanced across his knees. Sensibly, she had quickly made hot coffee and had spoken of ordinary things. Boldly she tackled the gun. Why had he brought it? The pheasant season was past. This was the time for deer. She had found tracks by the old mill, even seen the white tail of one shy creature bounding through the brush. Had she had any idea he might bring one down, she would say, then and there, « I forbid you. Something wild must be sacred here. And it is the deer. » But he was not that good a hunter, she consoled herself, while he sipped his coffee gingerly with a slowness that was ludicrous. She wanted to shake him out of his woebegone state, to call, « Come, man, speak up. Nobody is

dead. The world may be quaking but is still in its orbit. And what is more, you *live*. »

When he began to speak it was in the broken tones of one who has survived a holocaust. What devil in her made his plight somehow ridiculous? More than once, during his recital, her lips had twitched. Terrible laughter had lurked behind her concerned seriousness. What mockery had quivered, ready as an arrow, to fly straight to his wounded heart? His story was not simple; he had come, the hunter, to lead her to the sacred burial grounds. She sat alert, quivering, seeing more than she could ever divulge, uncertain how ever to console. For he was knotted and tied in the cage of his being.

Outwardly it was almost an idle tale. A party, yes, one of those New York roaring parties in his apartment at the top of hotel. It was to celebrate the approaching coming-out of his book and to announce his engagement. For he was to marry at last, he thought, and a girl who had been his young sister's room mate at college. And he admitted, as abashed as he had been at the excess of shot in his first pheasant, that he had carried in his pocket for three mortal years a license to wed. What was his pretence for delay? Probably he did not know himself. But he imagined that now he was eager for it as the girl had once been. But what kind of girl could this be who had submitted for three years to lie on the shelf? What had happened in the interval? Mrs. Heath could not seem to get hold of her, could form no picture. She was a wisp, a sort of *Doppelgänger* of his sister. And yet, he had expected her, after the three year's slight to come at his beck and call and to be the living proof, at a party, among their friends, of his good intentions. Mrs. Heath listened to Bartram with her mind busy juggling what he said with a probable reality, while the image of his intended bride slipped from the scene. Even in his narrative, it slipped away. His unashamed tears were not for her. Nor were they for himself unless a self denied.

His grief was Nora, young Nora, whose strange behavior eluded him, tortured him. She drank; no one knew how much. That pearly skin might be desert sand. Some terrifying deep thirstiness parched her long slender body. With pride he insisted that if she drank a lot, no one would know it. She was not one of the unseemly women who turn boisterous. At any moment, she could walk a chalk line, could turn a face, pure and unflushed, toward anyone, carry on a conversation in polite, self-contained syllables. But at some moment, unforeseen, she disappeared. At these infernal parties, she might leave the room without his noticing it. Soon an odd feeling that something was not right made him hunt every corner. Once he had managed to slip out and to follow her as she had walked swiftly as to some certain destiny in the empty dark of three o'clock in the morning. But at the moment when he

hoped to catch up with her, she had picked up a cab when there was not another in sight for pursuit. Where did she go?

Wasn't it odd that he never consulted Baker? Mrs. Heath could not restrain herself from asking, « And Baker? » Oh, Baker was a devil with women. She might not know it, to look at him. He did not have the appearance of a Romeo but he was successful with women. He was conspicuously untrue to his wife. And all this was related by Bartram with an odd pride in the man. Not that it wasn't a bit raw that Baker should pick on his own girl at a party intended to announce their engagement! The two of them had been thick as thieves from the start, secretive as alley cats, in their corner. And did Bartram realize how he gave to the pair the detachment of bright comic balloons at a carnival, their clown-faces floating in air, and to the guests a nature so distorted that beheaded creatures seemed to have taken over the night with only the brother and sister retaining their disenchanted forms and by their disenchantment to be accursed. But Bartram had hardly begun to feel uncomfortably aware of the conspicuous isolation of Baker and the girl when they had disappeared. One moment there, the next vanished. At the touch of a lighted cigarette they might have exploded into thin air!

He had noticed it, and across the width of the room met Nora's eyes, wide open, in a fixed entanglement with his own shocked glance. He had felt naked, naked, stripped by Baker's boldness, and nakedly he had looked at his sister, who suddenly, coolly, lifted her glass and eyeing him smilingly, composedly drank, sipping delicately with the gesture of an innocent child biting into a fresh apple.

Did he realize the picture he was painting of the brother and sister, alone and apart, and so terribly united in the carnival room with the masks and lolling bodies as unreal to them as stuffed birds? There he sat, in her house, in his idiotic hunter's costume, sniffing childishly; heartbreaking, really, in his unconcern for his intended bride who seemed no more than a drawing on a slate scrawled by Nora and by Nora rubbed away. What did it matter where she had gone or in whose bed she might lie? If in Baker's, so much the worse for her. And whether because she had intuitively liked Baker or whether she was suspicious of Nora, the eternal Eve, Mrs. Heath found herself not blaming Baker too much, excusing him really, as probably one who had suffered disaster deep in his bones and was making for himself some awkward amends.

And wasn't it curious, too, that Bartram did not so much as censure his friend except in playful terms that only half-concealed actual pride? What were these people to one another? She could only see them in the vivid setting of the carnival, where the brother and sister seemed to be fixed as flies on pins in their opposite corners, staring

at one another. But Bartram was going on with his story, in hints in fits and starts, trying to find a line to walk amidst the contradictions. He had things to do, as the host, and somehow in some interval, Nora had escaped him. She had left once more on her blind adventure.

This time he lost his head, rushing over the sprawled feet of guests, hearing scraps of conversation that confirmed his loathing for midnight poses. Hardly knowing what he did, he had hurried out into the corridor, then thoughtful, imagining himself smart and canny, he had returned, stealthily, and going to his room had changed his clothing for the old hunting suit. He hardly knew what he had in mind when he took the gun. But so equipped, with the gun, he seemed whole. He had even enjoyed his rôle as he slipped out the door like some uninvited stranger.

How deserted the street had been! Of course there wasn't a cab in sight and no Nora. But he had to be on the move and cannily, like a thief, got into a car standing in front of the hotel, an old once-fashionable model. The keys were to be found in the glove compartment; that he knew. It belonged to one of his guests, a woman who kept an old car because she was certain to smash it. He had got into the seat, nervously alerted to the street, to the emptiness, to the lighted corridor of the hotel where an ornate chair stood empty as an abdicated throne. This was the way he had often felt when he had planned to become a hunter, when he had smelled in fancy the richness of the autumn woods, felt the tingle of crinkling fields parting to a pheasant's wing. The street was a great empty meadow and around the corner he might find the bird on the wing. But where he drove, how far, weaving through what streets, he could not say, or when or how he had come up against one of the Sixth Avenue pillars with a hollow crack that knocked him out of the seat with no bones broken, only a shiver of glass falling delicately across his knees and one tiny sparkle of frost biting his chin.

He got out, coldly, soberly, stepping away from the car with the ease of one who has achieved a premeditated crime. The sky was lightening over the grey street. In the country, he thought, there would be the sound of birds soon on the wing. He had admired himself, his coolness, and the suddenness with which he had solved something. For it was clear to him that he could not, would not, go back to the hotel. He did not want to face suave Baker, to wait, too, for the return, but when? of Nora. Without hesitation, he had turned his back on the wreck. Let them find it and worry. He had the glee of a child to sustain him while he made his way to the station and took the early milk train to Mrs. Heath's town. On the train he read the paper and chewed gum.

Here was the man who could write a sustained, complicated, adroit

novel. Mrs. Heath eyed him cautiously as he sat there with his gun. He might really have been a hunter, come up fresh with the blood of wounded animals on his hands. The hunter who likes what he slays. Sees the beauty in the doe's eyes, the trembling of the great buck's antlers before he takes to flight. He sat, like many a hunter, with the innocence of some vast outdoors as penetrating as a scent upon him. And now he had ended, she did not know what to say. She stood before him awkwardly.

She could no longer remember how the day passed, what they ate, what they said. She only knew that in the late afternoon, he had taken his gun and made his way up the side of the bare hill opposite the house. Perhaps he might shoot a pheasant, he said, but there was something about his pose following the desperation of the long day that made her say sharply to him, «See you don't shoot yourself. That's all I ask. If you did, I would never forgive you.»

Just the same, she was nervous for a little, as she watched him toil up the hill through the bare trees, treading over the thick leaves with steps that seemed to leave a darker stain. Then she was busy at something, then again watching at the window and he had reached the top. In the light of the end of the wintry afternoon the hill was burning with the low sun in the west. The dead leaves under the bare trees crinkled with silver and rose; rose ran up the limbs and played among the quicksilver branches.

Bartram stood at the top with his figure in a flowing contour against the sky. The very outline of his body was fluid and fluid the movement of his arm as he moved it briefly with the gun. He was standing, resting the gun now against the ground, and he seemed to be looking down the slope that led to the wide river. He might be painted flat, she thought, like the figures in the ancient caves, where each separate object is clear but connected too with other strange things, one thing springing from another, contradictory things fusing, all united by the charge of life, surging with it, fluctuating at the edges, never still. And if she had suddenly seen a wonder-beast join him on the hillside, half-lion, half-goat, she would not have been amazed. What seemed untrue was the long night and the story of the hotel. He did not belong there, and where he might belong, she did not know. But at that moment, he seemed secure in an old, old world, storming with eternal oppositions beyond mental reconciliation. He stood there, appeased and safe, and for that moment at least, she knew that he must feel the night roll off like a sickness. She could see it from afar. The next moment, he disappeared, sudden as a diver, over the rim of the hill. He seemed to have fallen into a sea of air.

That vision of him dipped in brine of air was in some way the true Bartram. But what she meant by that, she could hardly say, for

there had been many Bartrams and she was conscious of them as she was aware of her many selves. As well ask where her head in the garnet hat now floated. But it had been real, that head, and the hat with its amorous crush of velvet had been a very part of her flesh. Bartram had come down from the little mountain with briars caught in his hat hanging like a film of sea moss to the battered brim. He had come refreshed, restored, ready for some deep-sea change. But vestiges of other selves still clung; glee and smug satisfaction when a wire arrived that evening from Baker asking if Bartram had shown up at her house. « Let them worry, » had been Bartram's comment.

And did they still worry about Bartram, though he was dead? Oh, Bartram was a man who came to stay, and thinking of Nora and Baker, she knew that Bartram was still living with them. He looked at them, too, from their young son's eyes, so like Bartram's that it had been a shock the first time she had seen the boy, so like the uncle, as he came stalking over the lawn and speaking in the same kind of voice with the same shy grace. That dry antagonism of the father toward the son, what was it except a memory of the thorn? For Bartram had been the beloved, would be so long as Nora had life. Baker had been only his surrogate.

In the weeks that followed Timothy's visit, it became more and more difficult to treat the boy's persistence with silence. He wrote such insinuating letters, mutely imploring. He even attempted a wily flattery that drew blood, for Mrs. Heath sat down one empty evening and dashed off an account of « recollections » that if they did not pierce to the kernel were still part of the fruit. Yes, Bartram had bought a house in her neighborhood the fall following the publication of his first book. He had disentangled himself from the hotel but not from his mother. What was her son to do in a big house without someone to care for him? If it had been part of his plan to live with his mother, it would have surprised Mrs. Heath. But he had shown an odd submission to the White Queen who as a perpetual mourning widow was troublesome to a difficult son. She cooked huge meals and they had to be eaten. Bartram had begun to put on weight and then to take more and more to the fields with his gun. He bought a hunting dog, milk-white, with tan spots that had in them a dash of color like blood. On visits to Bartram's house, the big creature got up in her lap like a puppy, gathering his hind legs into knots under him. « You are spoiling this dog, » she had scolded and her eyes had spoken to the White Queen whom he was also spoiling.

But he indulged himself, in Mrs. Heath's eyes, and was no man to accept the wilds without conveniences. Even his choice of a house had irritated her, for he disdained handsomer old houses because they did not have ready plumbing. His house had running water and the

good farmers had painted everything to shine; even the attic stairs. If he excused himself on the ground that he wanted to step into his new life at once and start writing without chores, he did not convince her. This was only another symptom of which his dandy tastes were crying evidence. He had his good clothes, his elegant shoes and his fine gun. Now he had his fine dog and to this he added a new car. When she tried to tell him that leisure and time were the only luxuries for a writer to cultivate, he took the pose of the old-time English squire who cannot function without some ritual of living. Well, it was his way, but that he made ease of it was not apparent.

Only wandering over the hills steeped him in content. She would see him from far off, with the dog and lowly local characters who shot not only for pleasure but desperate'y to fill the larder. He would drop in of an afternoon, filled with stories about his companions, and sometimes as he talked he had the glow of a navigator who has discovered strange ports. That he got on well with the local hunters was his pride and in the field, the boyhood equalities ruled. He would even lecture about hunting. You don't hunt to kill but walking is part of it. It makes an aim to the saunter. It was the smell of the earth, the look of the sky; one became a mariner on a strange sea guided by smells as the sailor is by currents and charts. You saw the grass ruffle to hidden creatures; the dog's nose became your compass. Your companions were seamates outward bound.

The White Queen accepted the dog and its hairs on the sofa but as time went on and Bartram pounded out another novel, she did not accept the station he had chosen. She grumbled and worried about his future. There was no money in it. Who had bought his first novel? There would never be enough readers to keep the wolf from the door. The hotel had been a good thing, a sound business, and he ought to go back to it. It was modern; this kitchen sink had a way of stopping up. Her son had to do a janitor's chores and feed the furnace, take out ashes. At the hotel he had his evenings. Why couldn't he write then, if write he must? Times were bad, millions were out of work. Why throw up a good situation on a gamble? Who could believe it, if you told them, that one could give up a good situation to starve? Oh, she made it hard for Bartram with her hard practicality that had behind it the deep convictions of the many. She was one of the hard-fact customers who damn the living fount. Not that she knew it; she adored her boy and so she worked on him, sowing doubts. He worried. More and more he saw his situation in the somber light of his mother's fears.

Then he would have a fit of flaunting the future in a burst of spending. He even decided on a special dog for raccoon hunting and when it arrived in a stuffy boxcar, shivering, tail between legs, straight

from the hills of Kentucky, he could not wait to acclimatize the brute but had to give it a workout that very night. What a comical night it had been, with deep snow covering the world, and all the traditional fixings culled from a book rigged up for the occasion! There had to be a bonfire, there had to be a bottle of whisky. The dog was brought out under a bright, shivery moon. Nora and Baker had joined the party in the country and cowering in their city clothes, following Bartram and the Heaths. Deep into the woods they had ploughed over the crunchy snow with branches sifting icy particles down their necks. The fire was laid according to ritual and in its bright glow they stamped their feet, taking slugs from the whisky bottle. Bartram tried to get the dog to rush the 'coons but the poor beast whined and tried to creep to the fire exactly as though the raccoons had been mythical. Baker was the first to give up and tramp back to the house. Mrs. Heath had followed and decided to make an ill-advised hot cocoa. Finally Bartram, Heath and Nora returned with the dog. The poor thing had slunk abjectly to the fire, paws out, nursing its grievance and imploring for pity with its homesick eyes. But Bartram was indignant at the cocoa and furious with the dog who had betrayed him. This was a 'coon hunt not a tea party. Baker stuck to the fire and Mrs. Heath stayed to keep him company while the three trailed off dragging the dog to give him a last chance. From within the house they could hear him whimper as he pressed himself to the warm crack of the door, refusing to stir. That finished it. Bartram was cold as a stone toward the brute and gave him away the next day to one of his hunting companions. Mrs. Heath could not remember that the dog had ever earned his salt but sometimes he appeared at her back door, lean and hungry, abjectly whimpering for a handout.

She wrote this story to Timothy. It is good enough for him, she thought, guilty that it revealed nothing of the true Bartram. How did it? It had been a confused time. If he had not been happy, he had often been — well, exalted. He loved driving recklessly over the back roads until he broke a spring. He had a dam built which his brother-in-law called « Bartram's folly. » For had it ever really become the lake, the paradise for wild birds, that Bartram dreamed? It had settled after one brief swell following a torrential rain into a thick green scum; rats had haunted the logs of the dam, tall goldenreeds flaunted in the marshy grass. He could not summon at will the dream wilderness or beckon to the wild birds for a price.

Perhaps the failure of his projects hampered him more than she then knew. Perhaps his mother's perpetual drip of disbelief wore away some hopeful chance. Perhaps the mere state of the nation, dead in a depression, awoke in him the desperate struggle of one trying to escape the common fate. But whatever it was, once he had finished

his second book, he began to talk his mother's language. It would not sell. What was his future? There was no hope for slow growth in this country of quick returns. A «real» writer was a pariah and must be. He didn't like the rôle.

More and more he sank into the writings of Dostoevsky. They seemed to speak some special language to him. But what? It was hard to say. Bartram was a modern man. He might feel love and he might have the compassion that gave to the Russian writer the gift of seeing the saint in the madman but somewhere along the route of his veins, the thing froze in a horror. When one read what he wrote, one stood on the brink of a new Ice Age; creatures were striking at one another in despair; the innocent not only suffered but were suffering fools. She remembered one hot afternoon when she had walked to his house out of some hopeful expectation. It had been a dark time and Heath, whose father had not died or relented, had gone out on a job for a little ready money. Bartram had been sitting in his shady yard under a great willow tree with a book. He had a glass of some drink beside him and came to meet her, followed by the spotted dog. It was the dog who had welcomed her. He looked cool and icy in his summer suit and she thought she detected an amused look as he glanced at her dusty shoes. Self-consciously, she tucked back a lock of hair and hoped he would not comment on her hands that were stained with a dye she had used to reclaim an old dress that morning. Only his eyes warmed her as they met hers, oddly excited, and seeing nothing except some secret thought of his own.

Yes, he had been reading, he said. Stavrogin's confession, that hot coal that had been suppressed in the early versions of *The Possessed*. Did she know it? Didn't she think this was something Dostoevsky must have intimately known and suffered in his own skin? Didn't she believe that man was a pit filled with unacknowledged terrifying impulses that sometimes broke out to his damnation? And when one looked around at the smug, the satisfied, at the petty aims that engrossed even one's best friends, wasn't damnation a privilege?

His intensity in that serene setting almost put its spell upon her. His affinity for the damned was contagious and for a moment she stood, transfixed. In that second when feelings so far outrun any articulated meaning, she knew there was no way out for her and Heath, no ship would sail, no breeze would ever waft them to green shores. There as nothing to wait for but the destructive final storm. She looked at her friend with hateful intent, for he seemed the very pride of doom. Thoughtlessly, she plucked a flower and broke off its head and, nibbling the stalk, turned away, afraid that he had seen the sudden flare of her antagonism. He followed her meekly down the hillside. In her haste, little stones rolled and scattered from under the soles of her

shoes. When she came to the foot of the hill where the brook was crossed by stepping stones, she crossed, leaping from stone to stone. And so ran into a great spider web drawn from one shrub to another straight across the path of the brook.

« Oh, » she called. « It's all over my hair! » Some of it was in her mouth. She began to laugh, calling, « Come taste it. »

« Taste what? »

« The web. I've ruined a spider's web. It tastes like something. She could really taste it. He put out a finger and drew a shred from her hair putting it gingerly to his mouth.

« Nibble it. Don't be afraid of it. It's as wholesome as honey. »

« Honey? » he cried. « You're crazy. »

« I'm not. It's made out of the spider as surely as honey is made by the bee. »

« But it tastes of death, » he said. « That's what it tastes of. Death. »

« Not to me. » She was ready to fight about the web. And running up the opposite bank of the brook she shouted back at him, unreasonably passionate, « Never to me. » A contagion of childish laughter seized them. They began to laugh out of nothing and running ahead of him she taunted, « Never, never. » « Never? » came his echo, and at the top of the incline she waited breathlessly, and answered in conciliatory tones, « Well, hardly ever. » When he came up, she took hold of the lapel of his squire's jacket. There was a blue cornflower in the buttonhole. « Listen, » she said. « It doesn't matter what I think. I'm referring to what you said back there. What counts is what you think. Just be sure you really think it. Maybe your way is through brimstone. If it is, then go to it. »

Half-smiling, half-mournful, he said, « And my mother? How can one answer her and by answering her, the world? »

She had stamped her foot and then deliberately kicked a small stone. They could hear its racket all the way down the hill and its final splash in the brook. She was fed up, she said, on fathers and mothers. His mother. Heath's father. It was enough to make one despair. Didn't he know they would hang chains on you if they could. *Their* chains. « How dare you talk of your mother. You're only his child but it's your world. Yours. Yours. » And half-crying more from the thought of the damnable hold Heath's father held over him than of any power Bartram's mother might possess, she started off toward the road that led home. « It's wicked, wicked, » she kept muttering and, finally turning back upon him, taunted, « You just want to make it hard for yourself, that's what. You should have been the one to run into the spider's web. Not me. » And unreasonably, she added « There's no justice. »

He had caught up with her, actually enlivened and charmed by

her rage. Her rage put him at ease; he had laughed and then sobered for real talk. What did she think of this? Then he had sketched a plan for a new book, rapidly, on fire with his own vision. Perhaps she had not fully understood what he wanted to do for the truth was that she was repelled by the group of characters he was assembling for probing; another terrible bunch of misfits, she thought, and this time he was condemning them to a quarrelsome exile on a desert island in the South Seas where they had been shipwrecked after vainly searching for some lost paradise. It was too late to know now what he might have made of it, for the book had vanished with his life, and was no more than the plan of an unknown inventor dying in his poverty.

Had he left no notes for this projected work? If Timothy Comfort knew of any, he made no sign. He seemed bogged down in an engaging affair with the Bakers, indiscriminately in love with the two of them. In notes to Mrs. Heath it was Nora this and Baker that until she wondered at herself for not smartly writing him to give up Bartram and be done with it. Then she suffered with the thought that she too was abandoning her old friend. Once she had a mind to write Timothy to give up celebrity chasing and to come out for an afternoon with the lowly characters with whom Bartram had once hunted.

When she met him, quite by accident, in a New York bar, she knew how inappropriate her notion was. Flanked by Nora and Baker and accompanied by a tall amiable girl whom he introduced enthusiastically as « Ann, » he was thoroughly at home. He was one of those insidious persons who irritate one only in absence; in his presence, she was charmed by his flattering confidence. His own drama was so engaging that he seemed to have forgotten Bartram. They were having a celebration, he confided. She could have no idea what they had recently gone through with Ann's mother. What a woman. Of course, she disapproved of him! He had tried playing on her sensibilities for she had some, of a kind, and he had flattered her. Divorced and alone, with time and a certain income, she had come to the conclusion she, too, wanted to write! He had even read what she called her « poetry » and confessed its naïveté had startled him. She was as touching as a child of twelve and as soon as he realized that, he knew she was dangerous. Nothing for it except to ship her out and he had had the bright idea of suggesting she enroll in one of the summer courses for writers. She was at the University of Ohio, right now, and grateful to him. In her absence, they had moved into another apartment, and one so small she wouldn't be able to squeeze into it on her return.

Now they were rid of the octopus, he meant to dig into his piece on Bartram in dead earnest. There was a rough draft. He wasn't satisfied...there were difficulties. He shook his head in a commiserating

manner that implied he was up against obstacles and lowering his voice to a conspiratorial mutter, began, « I don't know what to make of Baker. I owe him everything. He's advised me, helped me with my own work. I'm selling my own stuff right along. But on this business, he's sabotaged and I don't mean maybe. I can't make headway. He doesn't like the draft but won't say why. We came here on purpose so we'd run into him; they often hang around at this hour. Don't say anything now. You know your voice carries. He's clammed up. I want to consult you. »

Whether it was the Martini, swallowed too fast, or the insistent drone of Timothy's voice or whether it was the presence of the Baker whose actuality was so reminiscent of other younger Bakers, or whether it was the hypnotic buzz at the bar, behind her, on all sides, in differing keys, she could not say, but she felt as detached as if she were lodged in the ceiling and staring down from the plaster cornices. To keep Timothy soothed, she nodded methodically, even turned an interested gaze upon him. Then she stared into her drink, turned her head toward the Bakers on her left, turned back to Timothy, on her right, and even took in Ann who seemed to be wandering in the background. What she was most conscious of, was that there were too many people, pressing and shoving.

It wasn't merely the jolly Baker on her left but the first Baker, the one in the elevator, who had stood alone in his corner with a dog. There was a dog now. It was not the same dog but it had the possessive nature of the old dog with the fabulous beard. This one also stood on guard protecting Baker in his detachment from life. While the jolly Baker sipped his drink the dog waited upon the other secret saturnine Baker who relied upon him perhaps more than he had ever had the right to rely upon a single person. And of the two Bakers, Mrs. Heath gave the saturnine Baker her trust. She could hear Timothy's low muttered insistent voice while she could distinguish a certain clearing of the throat from Baker that indicated he, too, was about to break into confidence.

Beyond Baker, she could see Nora's bowed head with the sleek glossy wing of hair drawn up under a little hat. Though Mrs. Heath knew she was no longer the slim elusive girl but a solid matron with two growing children, the view she had of her, shut off as she was by Baker, was of old symbols and signs of the young Nora. That wing of hair, those gloves! For the long black suède gloves lying along the counter might have been the identical pair Mrs. Heath had witnessed the first day she had visited Bartram in his hotel. The fingers of this pair, curled, abandoned, suggested now, as they had then, some chanson-singer in a French café. And the hand, the long hand with

the green emerald ring, might have belonged to the young Nora who had bewitched her brother.

The phoenix-forms of the past were so insistent that once more she was back in the living room at Bartram's house, for the moment called to life by the emerald ring. Once more she was seeing the brother and sister as she had come upon them one summer day, when, as she stepped into the shadowy room, they had appeared to be as freshly dipped in some cool, watery light. Though she did not know, then, that it was to be the last time she should ever see them together, she had felt it as some special occasion. Lolling in two chairs, facing a glass table upon which rested two mellow drinks and two immaculate iced cupcakes, they might have been listening to some enchantment beyond any that could be conjured up by the Mozart record they were actually playing. The White Queen was invisible. Baker was off chasing some light of love and the night of Nora's adventuring had led her this time straight to her brother. They were so given over to their private view that Mrs. Heath, after a few awkward comments about the weather, had made some excuse to slip away. Bartram had come to the door with her, smiling not for her, but out of his own happy jubilation. His sister barely moved her head in farewell and lay stretched in her chair, in a trance of ease, extending two slippered feet in green snake skin that made of her body in its frail white dress an attenuated blossom.

In the loneliness that close proximity to the happiness of others brings, Mrs. Heath felt for the absent Baker. He was beyond the reach of the enchanted music and on the summer road she felt for him as one outcast feels for another. The haunting music had dyed the air with some iridescence. Was she in the world or in a great bubble of light where the glossy reflections are not only of an actual willow tree and bangle of hollyhocks but of scenes picturing long-ago joys? Only innocent distant joys could endure in that frail bubble of air; she saw herself a child, sailing high as a cloud in the old swing; paddling in the brook; picking shells from the sand with the sea murmuring at low tide. The bend in the road broke the spell; the trees on the way toward home wore a monotonous green uniform as oppressively regimented as orphans.

When she saw Bartram again she knew that the light of that particular day had been too bright to last. He was absent-minded and flipped coins on the table. She found herself unconsciously raising her voice when she spoke to him as if he might be deaf. Once the hotel had seemed a jail. Now it appeared to be the country. He kept asking, « What am I sitting here for? For what am I waiting? » No money was coming in, only going out. Why should they act as if they could expect quiet lives. There was no sense in expecting that much

from their lives. Heath incited Bartram and Bartram, Heath. In the hours that Bartram haunted their house, the two invented ludicrous schemes to make money. They talked about rubber in Brazil. Bartram even began to sketch a few designs for boats. Then they decided it would be a fine daring idea to get hold of an old junk and trade in the China seas.

Omens and dreams began to interest them. « If I could see a good omen like old Xenophon, I would know where to march, » Bartram declared. « Why do we take the pose of being so independent? All Xenophon needed was to see an eagle on the wing and then his mind was composed, and don't think he didn't act courageously. » Heath told of a dream he had about his father's house struck by lightning and in flames. He was eight years old, barefooted, and too scared to rush in with a bucket of water for fear the hot cinders would burn his feet. They both complained tediously of not sleeping and argued indecently about the best way to induce sleep.

Sometimes she heard herself talking out loud in an empty kitchen as she washed the dishes. « The birds have it good, they can fly away. » There was no honor in cooking and cleaning. The nihilistic pair even mocked her when she emptied ash trays. Heaven knows, she hardly knew what she did. But to keep one small dish clean, seemed urgent; she too was looking for omens that all might yet be well. She stuck to her painting grimly but there were days when she did not know whether to paint out or paint in. Now and again one or the other would stand behind her. She could feel their silent comment. Often it seemed to be their contempt.

They resented her for trying to be herself. They wanted her to give over, as they were doing. They even deserted her to take in the big city with an evening at the bars. When she heard their car returning at four in the morning, she called to them, her voice gay with a delicious sense of conspiring with them at last.

Then Bartram retreated to his own house. He was alone; the White Queen was extending some visit. On week ends he might show up, with a curious artificial smile and a girl from New York. « What do you think of the new one? » Heath would ask. And she found herself answering, « They're all alike. Handsome, if you like, but they might as well be Chinese. I can't talk to them. »

Neither could she talk to Heath or Bartram. « What have I done that is wrong? » she asked herself. It angered her to feel guilty. « Why should I feel guilty? » she furiously questioned. But even as she questioned, she knew she could not bear the guilty answer. The wild bird in the attic had spoken. As she was in terror that this admission might ruin her life and Heath's. As for Bartram, what was there to say to him? He had become more remote than a stranger.

There would be evenings when the three would try elaborately to recover themselves. Each would outdo the other in thoughtful, almost timid courtesies. They might have been treating each other with the tender concern of invalids. A good meal was certain to revive them and going out to the dewy grass, they would marvel at the tall sycamore cutting into the blackness of the sky. Once she had confided that sometimes in a storm she would wake and lie fearful thinking of that tree, how immense it was, how near the house and how it could crush them in their bed as easily as a walnut if it should be uprooted in a storm. « Like a walnut, » she had repeated, unreasonably moved. So uneasy a silence fell that she wished she had not spoken. A light breeze in the upper air ruffled the high plummy top of the great tree and a light from the house cast a weird glow along the ghostlike pale stem of the trunk. Bartram had laughed. « There you are, » he cried. « An omen. » His words, so lightly spoken, sounded terrifying in the night. An old oracle had found a voice.

They did not see him for days. When Heath finally walked over to Bartram's house, he came back shortly. « There's a family powwow going on, » he said. « I expect they'll railroad Noel back to that hotel. »

« He's a fool if they do, » she cried. « Let him sell his car first. Mortgage his house. Why, his new book may even sell! »

« You think so? » asked Heath in a dangerously cold voice. She had burst out then, crying bitterly, « How do I know? How do I know? Don't torture me. » But she could not have defined the nature of her torture. It was only that the house was too small. She could no longer breathe in it. When Bartram showed up late that night, she did not move, but sat languidly, like a sick person. He was too cheerful to notice her inhospitality. He was almost exalted.

He announced he had crossed the Rubicon. They had tried to high-pressure him back to the hotel but if it came to jails he would pick his own. Good old Baker had helped him cross up the plotters and had steered him to a better idea. Hollywood. Not in a big-time way, nothing sensational, just a job. Then he wouldn't wonder how he was to live, and could write. Baker had done a stretch there and what Baker could do, he could do. He could break that jail if worst came to the worst but what he hoped was that he would work out some reconciliation scheme. A sort of truce in life. If he could prolong the truce, he might get something done. He named names; if they could do it, he could.

For a moment she couldn't answer him. She even felt contempt for writers who, in comparison to painters, needed so much. Give her paints, a clean room, food and love, and what more was needed? But writers seemed to need the world to bow down before they were

convinced they were any good. Finally she said grudgingly, « Well, if that's the way it's to be, I'm glad to see you take it on the chin. » At least someone around here has had the guts to make a decision. » Heath snorted resentment for what seemed a slash at him and with the exaggeration of a moan, said, « Women are all alike. Happy to see us punch the old time clock. »

« Time clock? Time clock? » and she heard her voice as a disagreeable menacing echo of Heath and despaired. But I love him, she told herself, even as she heard her voice, surely belonging to someone other than herself and a most unpleasant person, toll out its doom. « I should say if anyone minded a time clock around here, it's me. *I've* worked. Cooked, cleaned, even made those idiotic book jackets so we could eat. Time clock, indeed! »

Perhaps if she and Heath had been alone the shame would not have been so great. Spoken in the presence of Bartram the words stripped Heath to the bone. His white face silently accused her of robbing him of his pride, for all time, and she left the house abruptly. Lying on the damp grass in the darkness she accused herself, excused herself. I am robbing myself, not him. I know it. And she felt the pang of the future in all its bereavement full upon her. Oh, what tiny thing might yet save the day? But why should *they* expect the miracle? For lack of a handful of rice, babies perished somewhere, for a mistake in timing, cars crashed into cars, and the young went out to die in armies they had not chosen. If she gathered such thoughts, it was her way of composing herself. If there was to be suffering one should not feel entirely alone. But the next moment she was taxing all her resourcefulness for new hope. Perhaps if she made a drastic sign to Heath and one day simply burned up his paper boats....

But it was Bartram who had burned his boats and, accepting his own sentence, had decided on Hollywood.

She had gone so far back in her thoughts that she hardly recognized the voice of Baker which had been for some minutes monotonously trickling into her consciousness with patient insistence. « ... and if you managed to get rid of that young ass, we could talk better, » he was saying.

« I don't think he can hear, » said Mrs. Heath, uncomfortably aware of the sound of her voice that seemed to belong to another day and saturated with that day's burden. « See, he's left us, » and Timothy had indeed tripped off to join some crony.

« I suppose he is filling your ear about me, » said Baker. « But what can I do? That piece. Simply puerile. I won't give my O. K. to it. That's flat. I don't believe in the fashionable personalization racket anyhow. All about Paris. I ask you. Noel was a fool in Paris. How he wore Brooks Brothers suits. As if he couldn't have written

mother-naked. His hunting. Only thing Timothy didn't think of was to get a count of the birds he shot. I can't see it. No.»

His No had so quarrelsome a sound that she almost reversed her sympathy for him. After all, it was Bartram, not Baker, who was dead. His work was now at Baker's mercy and the sound of his voice seemed to hint that it was at the mercy of his revenge. But the source of that revenge, if such it were, was in some wound and her own wounds forced her to blunt her accusations to a mild, « But why did you let the boy begin? You hardly knew him? » Baker's answer was a groan, « God knows. Nora liked him. He *adored* the idea of Noel. » The tone of his voice was a wreath to the young Noel, his inseparable early friend, who had adored him. Whether he knew it or not, Baker, too, was an actor in that curious irrational drama of which Bartram, the writer, had been the master.

Between that idyllic afternoon at Bartram's house and this moment at the bar so many changes had been wrought that she seemed to look back from another universe. Imperceptibly the alterations had brought the actual world closer to the horrors of Bartram's kingdom ruled by the cabbage-heads. Even the persons at the bar signified by their scars that they had suffered on some desert isle of the spirit not so remote from that abandoned spot where Bartram had planned to disenchant his victims in the novel he never lived to complete. The bar with its glittering array of glass gave the illusion of any bar on a ship at sea where the passengers congregate in an ill-founded hope of lasting intimacy. Baker's attempt to catch her off guard and win her for his side had no better foundation. She would get up and go and when Timothy and the Bakers had vanished, Heath and Bartram would still be with her.

As for Bartram's work, it would yet soar. With or without Baker.

Timothy had returned, whispering again and she frowned at him as she turned to listen. He was muttering that there had really not been too much to say about the Hollywood phase of Bartram's existence and he had practically ignored it. He had written one book out there, the best anyone had yet written on that subject, and, he ventured to say, the best that anyone would ever write. Didn't she agree? By not focusing in the conventional way on the industry but merely on the distorted individuals who swarmed around like maggots, he had really made the revelation. Oh, the absolute, complete revelation! In his youthful enthusiasm, Timothy had the look of an inspired apostle. He wanted her to know that it wasn't his hurt ego that was at stake. The fact was that Baker — and his voice dropped so low she could barely decipher it — had sabotaged the proposed publication of the omnibus which was tied up by a contract to include the introduction. And damned smart of him. What did Baker take him for, a booby?

But Baker wasn't God. There would be an edict later than his. She could take his word for it. And he just wanted to go on record...

But what he wanted to go on record about, Mrs. Heath could not say. « I don't care what he wants to go on record about, » she told herself. What would it matter? She could no longer bear to recall her shameful behavior in the shameful scenes that led to the final one when Heath had actually sailed away, on a real, not a paper, boat, and with another woman. She remembered that Bartram had locked up his house a month or so before that time and had driven off in his car. « Watch out, » she had called to him. « You may live to be one of the best dressed men in America. » If it was autumn, the marvelous season when no one would have known it.

He had gone with a certain proud acceptance of what he took to be his destiny, reiterating over and over that one had to live and this could be a way. It was the twentieth century, not the eighteenth, he apologized. It had been his mother's horrid reality that he had embraced out of any possible alternative he might have had the knack to manage. That he would continue to write « out there » was a foregone conclusion. How, he did not know. But he would.

Well, he *had*. If his mother's world had engulfed him he had made a lamentation that seemed to be in itself praise for an invisible kingdom where the cabbage-kings would be the exiles. Rejected by his business-minded relatives, goaded by his apparent ill success, faithful to his guilty love, he had plunged into his nightmare, and once there deep at last, he had fled as often as he could to the enchanted woods.

He had fled to the woods where he had shot doves — so he said — and, that he had married or what he had made of it, did not seem to count. He had shot doves. That, she would insist. And coming back from the woods in a station wagon with a load of doves, not in the fall of the year but close to mid-winter, he had charged, head-on, with his wife and spotted dog, into another headlong car and ended it for all of them, except the dog, who had stepped out free in the whirl of broken and scattered wings where Bartram lay.

« All I want to say, » argued Timothy, forgetting in his earnestness to lower his voice, « is that it doesn't matter about my end of it. It's the work. Has anyone a right to keep it down? » Looking at the young man Mrs. Heath respected him for the first time, for he was carried away in a passion of selfless interest which he barely understood. It touched him with the only kind of dignity she felt he might ever know and she tapped his hand, lightly, smiling. « It won't be kept down. » And because she had felt the full force of so much negation, she had to say with a conviction as unreasonable as hope itself, « I'm sure of it. »

EDOARDO CACCIATORE

ALTRI GRADUALI

TETRASTICHA

I

*Il mare è il petto dell'uomo quando lo gonfia
La certezza incredibile che il mondo sia.
Segno d'indubitabile i muri a piombo
Segnano invece il confine della follia.*

II

*Sazi di storia a digiuno di avvenire
Si ricacciano ormai nella cronaca cieca.
Stomaco e Sesso i due vecchi protagonisti
Ostentano soli una lugubre baldoria.*

III

*Le forche le sedie elettriche i plotoni
Sono oggi la nostra allegra compagnia.
Alato il giorno va di soffio in bisbiglio
La sera fa sue le piazze con gli strilloni.*

IV

*Nei meriggi brevi una luce di rame
Sui visi umani sull'asfalto ha timbri arditi.*

*Intensità d'idoli di sopravvissuti
La gioia maligna nasconde e gli appetiti.*

V

*La ruggine macchia di nuovo gli ippocastani
Le chiese scampanano il nulla nella sera
Ma i ragazzi che a calci spingono un bidone
Li visita la verità risorge intera.*

VI

*La realtà riscatto ininterrottamente
È senza scampo il campo di ricadute.
La bellezza — lo vedi — non ha conclusione
Riprende il delirio mai del tutto goduto.*

VII

*Il viso la voce la volontà la vita
Irripetibilmente è quanto t'identifica.
Trepida minuziosa carne — la bellezza
Non è ornamento astratto è ciò che unifica.*

VIII

*Giugno è il mese colmo è il mese perfetto
Architettura di gridi tutta la strada.
Nella sua unicità l'amore ogni volta
La morte anche lei un'idea incarnata.*

IX

*Di somiglianza in somiglianza mai l'eguale
La vita sempre così raggiante di errori:
Accenna la grazia del tuo collo di cigno
L'identico segreto che ogni volta ignori.*

X

*L'insistenza amorosa cancella i tratti
La vita infine cancella sempre se stessa
Gli oggetti al suicida sono nature morte
Atti di una sopravvivenza assoluta.*

XI

*Caro volto conosciuto senza parole
Di' l'universo si tace tutto è ascolto
Ma in alto — senti — già voce di uccelli lacera
Una perennità che non è più cobalto.*

XII

*Queste risate crollanti da un'altra stanza
Accentuano la distanza tra cielo e cielo.
Il tempo non è in pendio non è fume
Le statue i morti non hanno lo stesso gelo.*

XIII

*Le rotaie dei carri nella pietra arcaica
Sono gesti nostri non li riconosciamo.
Gli amanti spalla a spalla s'indicano un duomo
Dove sono ramarri e terra bruciata.*

XIV

*Che tutto sia senza senso anzi vuol dire
Le ombre che siamo chiedono consistenza.
Potenza rampante o allucinazione
Chi parla di evadere anzi restituire.*

XV

*Poiché la verità è incipienza continua
Làsciati dar del pazzo tu resta all'inizio*

*Sempre i cimiteri nella corsa del treno
Annunziano la vicinanza della vita.*

PENTASTICHA

I

*In angelomachia di raggi obliqui
Si squarciano le nuvole — brucia l'altezza.
L'eroismo dei sensi non ha altri ingaggi
Iridescenti cupole di vetri accende
Nei cieli tetri ed iniqui dell'astrattezza.*

II

*Immagine memorabile ad ora ad ora
Anche tu sei una cosa inevitabilmente.
Sembrava interminabile eppure rotondo
Un sole contagia al traffico cittadino
Una nostalgia del caos dal profondo.*

III

*Umanamente la città si decompone
Sazietà e inedia vagano lato a lato
Ognuno nel viso porta la sua funzione.
Una falda di luce un rovescio di fuoco
Labile apocalissi non verità a fuoco.*

IV

*Le leggi di sviluppo dànno altra ebbrezza
D'ipogeo in apogeo che acrobazie.
Lineamenti d'un viso e sono la strada
Un lamento di tórtore e sono i veicoli
Alla curca dove indugiano con incertezza.*

V

*Dal deposito di locomotive il fumo
 Colonne tórtili erige un padiglione
 Gesti lontani partenze definitive.
 Non fine confine ti sia l'alterazione
 Mentre il futuro si prepara ad obbedire.*

HEXASTICHA

I

*All'uscita dei cinema gli spettatori
 Ecco hanno un crollo in ognuno si nega
 La squallida trascendenza che già dilegua.
 Ora corriva al vero la città diresti
 Senza tregua una libertà i passanti leva
 E i rifiuti e i resti a pié di muri illustri.*

II

*La corsa degli olmi prolunga la criniera
 Nella memoria che ripropone la via.
 Di episodio ilare in storia guerriera
 Di astuzia innocente in fosco difetto
 Il delirio onnivago della ragione
 Schianta le macchinazioni dell'intelletto.*

III

*I viaggiatori appena il treno è in moto
 Staccati in parte in parte già distaccati
 La follia assaporano l'entità del vuoto.
 Stranirsi dei visi avvento di tenerezza
 Anche l'avar con la carezza di un dono
 Generosa sorte d'ognuno — esibirsi.*

IV

*Dove corri fermati è il momento
In quest'alterazione così sediziosa.
Le facciate contro il sole sono l'eterno
Sul momento non più la medesima cosa.
Fermo il nome sembra sulla targa stradale
Per altre labbra ancora rimpatrio reale.*

HEPTASTICHA

I

*Volti estranei su una pista d'atterraggio
Queste strade che conobbero il tuo passaggio.
Decisamente la luce oggi è per dire
Paese d'esilio snaturato la storia
Il futuro non è — sempre è per venire.
Esteriori come alla lente del viaggio
Queste strade che conobbero il tuo passaggio.*

II

*Quando mai il mondo esterno così ci parve
Certo nel silenzio sonoro della luce.
Non avanzavi tu — la tua grazia di cigno
Che una volontà oltre l'amore conduce
Di festa in festa di agonia in agonia
L'altra congiunge — la vera realtà che induce
Ogni gesto in un discorso a meraviglia.*

III

*Bene i laghi fanno da sfondo nei supplizi
Né strazio né quiete hanno supremazia.
L'inferriata che ci si chiude alle spalle
L'amore sempre sevizia dell'avvenire*

*Restituzione ancora felicemente
Le virtù si riconosceranno nei vizi
Ma la pace è nei morti la pace è geologia.*

IV

*La libertà da giovani è l'illimitato
Il mucchio di pula su cui soffia il vento.
La felicità fino a ieri troppo celebre
Le spettrali coordinate carcerarie
Né lutto né frutto labili esatta forma
E di te norma poi senza di te non vana
La melagrana che Persefone ha nel pugno.*

GUGLIELMO PETRONI

NOI DOBBIAMO PARLARE

PARTE PRIMA

1

Un buco nel giornale, una cosa da poco, ma qualche volta basta un nulla.

Si ha un bel dire, ma dieci anni sono lunghi a trovarsi sempre nel medesimo caffè, alla medesima ora, d'inverno dietro i vetri, fin dalla primavera sul marciapiede. Piazza Grande potrebbe essere anche più vasta, avere negozi più vistosi, un po' più vario movimento di gente e di veicoli, ma nulla può cambiare l'inesausto ripetersi delle medesime cose: gli stessi i colori, le insegne, le stesse le persone e si finisce per non vedere più nulla, non si vedono più nemmeno le facce degli uomini e non c'è diversivo, se pure ci potesse essere, che non faccia ricadere tutto nella sua monotonia. Allora anche un buco nel giornale può divenire una risorsa. Venturino sembra fatto apposta per sentire il peso di questa eterna uguaglianza; ha conosciuto un poco di mondo e, in dieci anni, dal suo ritorno, non pensa che alla noia di tutto ciò: ma ogni giorno alla stessa ora è là, col suo giornale. Qualche volta si domanda com'è che non si stanca; ma poi è inutile che se lo domandi perché stancare si stanca di una cosa così.

Malgrado tutto ormai non pensa più che alcunché possa cambiare ed anche dentro, là in fondo dove la sua vita corrisponde ad un sordo rimescolio che lui solo conosce, l'inquietudine di quella fissità è profondamente acquisita dal ripetersi invariabile delle sue abitudini. Perciò, a quell'ora, su quel marciapiede, a questo tavolo in piazza, per niente rinuncerebbe alla lettura del suo giornale, alla barriera di carta che lo isola dall'inamovibile ripetersi della vita serale.

Piazza Grande: Pescia, una città che sembra tutta lì, una città

che a volte sembra non ricordarsi nemmeno che il tempo passa; una città piccola come non se ne conoscono molte.

Così, isolato, protetto dai fogli della *Nazione*, lui con tutti quei violenti umori che corrono sotto la pelle, mentre legge quanto c'è di leggibile nei quattro fogli, nella propria mente non cessa di ricostruire l'eterno ripetersi d'ogni logora consuetudine che chiude, nella piazza, una giornata di più. Se poi qualche volta, mentre legge, si dimentica un poco di quello che ha attorno, seguendo il filo degli argomenti di cui si parla sul giornale, può anche formulare un dialogo di affari come sarà domani, oppure pensare alle parole violente che gli converranno in una discussione che prevede e che prepara, ma la lettura prosegue senza ch'egli ne perda il filo.

Seguire contemporaneamente due pensieri, occupare la mente con due argomenti indipendenti che camminano ognuno per la propria strada è, per Venturino, una specie di difetto organico, oppure un dono, comunque una cosa assai terribile ma di cui si vanterebbe se, tra le sue abitudini, vi fosse anche quella di comunicare agli altri ciò che sta dentro di lui.

Doveva esser certamente anche questa forcuta struttura mentale, in ogni modo, ad autorizzarlo a quella noia, a quella insofferenza, al preoccupante risentimento nei riguardi dell'altrui diritto di esistere. Non poteva proprio sopportare la fissità dell'esistenza di Pescia, pensarvi gli arrossava la fronte, il sangue gli saliva violentemente al viso, eppure, con cocciuta simmetria di tempi, lui stesso non faceva che accentuare l'eterno ripetersi delle giornate pesciatine.

Quel giorno però aveva fatto una cosa di cui si era reso conto soltanto dopo, era avvenuta da sé: leggendo, tutt'un tratto aveva premuto la punta del sigaro sulla pagina, aprendo una finestrella rotonda che, prima di spegnersi, continuò ad allargarsi sensibilmente; allora, deviato il toscano all'angolo della bocca, seguendo ancora un suo ragionamento sulla « Tempestosa seduta all'Assemblea Nazionale francese » accostò l'occhio al foro guardando di là della sua barriera come da uno spiraglio segreto.

Di là dal buco, dopo tutto, non c'era che la solita piazza: il fornaio che spegneva le luci, il bar che le accendeva, la lampada rossa della farmacia, l'insegna ridipinta del merciaio, la drogheria che cala la saracinesca; l'ora di tornare a casa, a cena, ormai vicina.

Una piazza irregolare, grande, lunghissima; sproporzionata per una città piccola piccola. Il centro di un borgo oppure, ugualmente, la piazza d'un luogo antico di costumi, civilissimo, d'antichi palazzi di case modeste, una chiesa, un orologio. Attorno, se pur non la si vede, tanta campagna, tante colline verdi piene di piccoli paesi; tanta campagna che ha una voce, che annuncia la propria notte di grilli, di voli. Lo

si sa, una campagna incomparabile che preme dietro l'urbano disporsi di pochi palazzi, di vecchie case, di case nuove.

Un buco nel giornale, una cosa da nulla, ma attraverso sembra che i colori delle cose si siano segretamente sviluppati d'un tratto; ed i particolari dei portali antichi si scandiscono, tornano leggibili anche a lui che non li vedeva più pur tenendovi gli occhi fissi sopra. — In ciò che si guarda sempre ci può essere qualche cosa che non si è ancora mai visto. Quante cose! ed ora è l'ora di andare, di alzarsi da questo tavolo, a casa, a cena.

Venturino ha pagato il ponce e si dirige a casa: prima di lasciare la piazza dà un'occhiata ad una finestra al terzo piano di un palazzetto di fronte al caffè e, passandovi poi sotto, in segreta violenza mormora: « Cretino! ».

È la finestra del suo amico, la finestra del laboratorio attraverso la quale, controluce, per un attimo intravede la sagoma di lui, di Francesco: — È là che armeggia. Pazzie! — Francesco pesta nel mortaio e, mentre da ore continua sordamente quel lavoro, ogni tanto dà una occhiata fuori: già da prima ha visto Venturino seduto al suo tavolo: — mi aspetta — ha pensato, ma non si è sentito di lasciare il lavoro. Ora ha visto che se n'è andato: — A cena, anch'io — intanto continua a pestare; deve ridurlo in polvere, deve raggiungere le dimensioni colloidali, l'oro che sta pestando da ieri. L'oro l'ha preso nel cassetto di sua moglie: un vecchio fermaglio rotto e due orecchini ormai inservibili; da tanti anni stavano nel cassetto, in una scatoletta a parte vicino agli ori buoni, sua moglie non se ne accorgerà nemmeno, eppoi, comunque, lui ne aveva assolutamente bisogno. A Venturino l'altro giorno lo spiegò: « La chimica dei colloidi è un mondo di cose meravigliose che servono al progresso; s'impara a conoscere i segreti della vita, la struttura della materia, nel mondo dei colloidi ». Questo ha spiegato a Venturino, ma lui ha riso; ride e dice parole volgari, perfino. — Nessuno capisce la bellezza dei segreti della scienza, eppure non c'è nulla che valga di più d'esser conosciuto. Ma queste cose non si dovrebbero dire a Venturino, perché lui ci ride sopra e dice frasi sguaiate. — Non glielo dovrebbe dire ma finisce sempre per riparlare, con lui; pure dell'oro gli ha detto; glielo ha spiegato che l'oro, tanto più peso dell'acqua, ridotto nelle dimensioni colloidali non va a fondo ma resta in sospensione; « Una cosa che sembra impossibile, ma la scienza lo spiega; la meccanica dei colloidi è il segreto stesso della materia come energia ». Certo farebbe meglio a tenersi per sé queste cose. A dirle a Venturino è tempo sciupato e ci si guasta il sangue. Tuttavia gli aveva ripetuto: « Le particelle di una sostanza possono disperdersi uniformemente in un'altra sotto forma di molecole ». Ma che andava a dirlo a fare a quello zotico miscredente? « Anche gli antichi conoscevano l'oro in sospensione nell'acqua, lo chia-

mavano l'*aurum potabile*, che si può anche bere, ed io che lo so ora lo preparo. Chi è ignorante è ignorante e di queste cose non può capire nulla ». Venturino aveva riso.

Tutti i giorni, chiuso il Mercato dei fiori dove Francesco faceva i suoi affari più importanti, subito dopo mangiato si serrava nel laboratorio. Quando lui diceva laboratorio c'era chi sorrideva, c'era chi ripeteva la parola con intonazione più o meno apertamente schernevole, ed in quel caso Francesco smetteva di colpo di parlare, si chiudeva in sè stesso irritato e triste, mentre i suoi occhietti, sul viso roseo, in quel momento assumevano un'espressione d'odio che sembrava impossibile, in un volto così ben nutrito di grasso. I suoi invece ormai si erano abituati, ed in casa sua si diceva laboratorio come si diceva cucina, tinello, senz'ombra di sottintesi. « Del resto » diceva sempre sua moglie, « meglio lì che all'osteria ». Nel laboratorio Francesco fa una infinità di cose, legge *La scienza illustrata*, si fabbrica piccole cose curiose, motorini elettrici, all'occorrenza può accomodare una sedia o una sveglia. Ma la chimica domina, è la sua passione più forte, è la ragione della sua vita; in mezzo alle sue fantasie chimiche la sua faccetta rosea, è nell'estasi sorridente d'un angelico mondo che non tutti possono comprendere. « Ne sa lui d'intrugli » dice la figlia quando è sicura di non essere udita.

Venturino si avvicina al portone di casa, una delle vecchie case di Borgo della Vittoria. Un buco nel giornale è poca cosa, ma se oggi egli ha visto calar la sera che le altre volte lo imprigiona nella notte senza che se ne accorga, tutto merito di quella trovata; e la sera è calata senza il solito accrescersi di tutti i malumori; non si è sentito avvampare il volto dall'ira in cerca di argomenti che la giustifichino, come gli succede a quell'ora tornando a casa, e lo deve a quella piccola invenzione. Però, inoltrandosi nel buio portone di casa, affrontando le oscure scale larghe, trascurate, restringe gli occhi, serra le labbra, serra i denti con forza e gira lo sguardo attorno, nel buio, cercando forse qualche cosa, cercando un pretesto per quella rabbia. « Una rabbia da imbecille », si dice qualche volta da se stesso, ma poi la rabbia cresce.

Ha fatto mettere una lampada al suo piano, davanti alla sua porta, per via del buio delle scale; ma ora è spenta e lui guarda verso il punto dove è situata, con odio e noia. Ad aprire viene un ragazzotto malvestito, d'una età indecifrabile, biondo, il quale non fa in tempo a tirarsi indietro che una pedata lo raggiunge e lo respinge barcollante nell'interno: « Accesa ha da stare a quest'ora ». Il ragazzo, un attimo si curva forse un poco spaventato, ma si ricompone subito, si volta indifferente al padrone, unicamente preoccupato di mantenersi ad una distanza prudenziale, borbottando qualche cosa sull'ora che gli era sfuggita.

« Non so che si faccia qua dentro quando non ci sono io ».

Poi nella casa si fa silenzio, un silenzio un poco greve, triste com'è la stanza dove il tavolo è apparecchiato per Venturino. In mezzo al soffitto pende una lampada ornata da una trina logora, appoggiati alle pareti pochi mobili oscuri e massicci, i muri ricoperti di sbiadita tappezzeria che conserva qualche traccia d'una serie di mazzi di fiori e di frutta colorati.

Appena Venturino ha consumato il suo veloce pasto servitogli da una donna silenziosa, il ragazzo torna per posargli davanti un pacchetto di registri e di carte, i libri dei conti, poi se ne va senza parlare. Venturino si mette al lavoro, i suoi calcoli corrono regolari, sdipanando la loro trama; il suo volto si distende, dei conteggi non perde un particolare mentre la sua mente, però, non trova impedimento a correre altrove: — A quest'ora, laggiù, suonano le ore che si sentono. Per tutta la giornata in quella casa era come se la pendola non esistesse, ma appena sera, ogni volta che batteva le ore, si udivano, riempivano tutte le stanze, correivano per la casa i rintocchi sonori e gravi. — Quella casa, laggiù, che almeno una volta al giorno passa nella mente di Venturino. — E sembra che nella vita di un uomo le cose che ci sono si possano contare, ed invece sono infinite; il suono delle ore di una vecchia pendola può rimanere nel cuore più della morte d'una persona amata. Ed il prato verde, subito fuori della casa; un altro verde, i verdi delle nostre campagne sono tutt'altra cosa —.

La revisione dei conti è finita, gli appunti per l'amministratore pronti, Venturino ha finito la sua giornata e si accorge del silenzio della sua casa, del vuoto che sembra contenere il suo breve appartamento, ma sorride, le sue ire per il momento sembrano annegate in quel silenzio.

Ma anche fuori, a Pescia, tutto è già silenzio, un silenzio che ti abitua poi a percepire un certo brulichio, un lontano e sotterraneo confondersi di voci, un assedio di vita sommersa e densa: è l'assedio della campagna che sembra stringere le case ad una ad una, dei campi estremamente lavorati, alambiccati d'accorgimenti, controllati palmo a palmo, che nelle notti si riscattano di tanta inusitata sottomissione al lavoro umano e rivivono uno scoppio di libero formicolare di vita; ed i colli, poi, tutti attorno mandano come un controcanto, una voce solenne, ancora più pastosa e colma di ogni altro notturno mistero.

II

Al mattino, Venturino passa il tempo gironzolando per il Mercato dei fiori; non ha alcun interesse, proprio coi fiori, e considera il loro commercio un lavoro noioso e poco redditizio; un podere che ne produce un poco ce l'ha, ma l'ha affittato per evitare tutte le noie dei conteggi della mezzadria e, se qualche volta s'incontra al mercato

col suo contadino che ha portato una partita di garofani nati sulla sua terra, gli si avvicina, guarda i fiori con una smorfia: « Son tra i peggiori di questa mattina; non vedi che sono tisici? ». Il suo contadino non lo contraddice più, gli risponde appena, oppure parla di fitto e di migliorie; ma Venturino fa finta, oppure davvero non l'ascolta. Al Mercato dei fiori ci va perché il luogo è il più vivace della città, al mattino; eppoi forse i fiori non gli dispiacciono, gli sembra che a vederli si smuova qualche cosa di sotterraneo in fondo alla sua coscienza. A casa però fiori non ne vuole, gli piacciono solo lì dove ve ne sono tanti stretti in mazzi compatti pronti per la spedizione, cento assieme sembra che formino un fiore solo e sono ancora odorosi di terra, freschi e bagnati. Al mercato si vede con Francesco, ma non si scambiano nemmeno una parola, si guardano appena senza salutarsi se si passano vicini: — tanto ci vedremo oggi. Ma poi, magari è capace di rinchiudersi nel laboratorio. Puh, laboratorio; che vada al diavolo anche lui. —

Quelle grandi masse di fiori stretti l'uno all'altro però hanno un certo fascino, lo attraggono qua e là; il vederli così accuratamente stretti, ridotti in grandi masse colorate, gli par che gli rammentino qualche cosa che ha dentro: un uguale ammasso stretto di cose, un nodo, una vita intera, ingombrante, stretta in uno spazio più piccolo del necessario. — Un nodo da sciogliere, un grumo —. L'altro filone della sua mente si stacca, si affianca alla sua mattinata e, questa mattina, lo riconduce al ricordo di quella casa... Ma non è un ricordo; egli guarda i cesti di fiori, li cataloga ad uno ad uno, li valuta, ne scorge le più segrete bellezze che è sicuro sfuggano a tutti coloro che si trovano sotto la tettoia del mercato; ma in lui rivive quella casa. — Anni lunghi quelli, quasi interminabili, lunghi quanto basta perché divenissero una morsa che si stringeva, un laccio che chiudevà in un unico nodo quel passato: un nodo che resterà.

Venturino che passeggia sfaccendato, in mezzo al trambusto alacrisimo del Mercato dei fiori, tra i carretti che trasportano ceste al treno, i camioncini che sulla strada fanno strepito, il ragazzo che vende i dolci fritti e i croccanti, sembra il più alto degli uomini che g'li stanno attorno; ha grandi le spalle, cammina con una certa solennità anche se è distratto, spesso non risponde a chi lo saluta, ed è certamente tra tutti il meglio vestito: si veste a Firenze, e ci va apposta in macchina quando si fa i capi nuovi, e se ne fa molti anche se non gli servono, quando gli viene in mente di rinnovarsi.

Fu lei, la donna di quella casa, Marianna, ad insegnargli come si veste un uomo che abbia un po' di stile, a suggerirgli il tono più adatto a lui, a perfezionare certe sue caratteristiche che a prima vista potevano apparire negative, come quella specie di taglio contadino della corporatura che, invece, con una certa cura nel vestire che Venturino aveva assimilata alla perfezione, poteva essere un'attrattiva. Ma lui può

anche dimenticarsi di tutto questo e mettersi a sputare, sbraitare sguaiatamente, se si tratta di aver ragione anche sul più violento della città; in tal caso egli può dimostrarsi d'una tal brutale rozzezza da fare arretrare anche il più spericolato dei cittadini di Pescia.

— Una donna, tanti anni fa. —

Ma ora è arrivato il giornalaio. l'ora dei treni si avvicina, i carretti si affrettano, le ultime trattative si fanno concitate e, su tutta quella confusione: « La Nazione! la Nazione! » è la voce del giornalaio che si sposta da un angolo all'altro del mercato e fa da controcanto a tutti i rumori. Venturino aspetta che passi vicino a lui: « La Nazione! la Nazione! » compra il giornale, lo mette in tasca ed esce, va verso Porta Fiorentina, alla Conceria, dove gli impiegati e gli operai, dai finestrone e dai vetri della porta dell'ufficio da qualche tempo già spiano per controllare il suo arrivo.

III

Subito fuori di Pescia, in una casa colonica quasi sullo Stradone, la strada provinciale che da Firenze conduce al mare, il padre e la madre di Venturino vivono ancora con la nuora e la nipote, moglie e figlia del fratello di Venturino morto in Russia durante la guerra. Quella è la vecchia casa dei Frateschi, ed il podere che si stende tutto attorno è il podere dei Frateschi, non troppo grande ma terra buona, che rende quando è lavorata senza tregua. Da quanti anni, secoli, non lo si sa più. innumerevoli Frateschi hanno lavorato in quel luogo per tutta la loro vita, in mezzo a quei filari di viti, nel breve tratto di bosco lungo il rio, e l'altro pezzetto che sale sulle prime falde della collina: che pace là, se si volta le spalle allo Stradone.

Solo la schiena curva, piegata in due ma non ancora del tutto priva d'un ricordo dell'antica potenza, nella figura di Casimiro, il padre di Venturino, può raccontare la storia lunga, tessuta di continuo lavoro, di fatiche che conoscono l'albe e tutti i tramonti dei suoi ottanta anni, solo quella schiena piegata come conviene a chi è stato sempre curvo al lavoro della terra, può raccontare quante generazioni dei Frateschi non conobbero altro. L'occhio sottile del vecchio, o della moglie, della nipote, ed anche lo sguardo triste e profondo della nuora, bastano da soli a determinare i limiti brevi e durevoli, inamovibili di quella vita condotta come fu ereditata lontano nel tempo, da padre in figlio. Anche Venturino ha ereditato quello sguardo, ma lui ne conobbe i poteri che gli altri non hanno mai sospettato, ne conobbe le possibilità più recondite e inarrivabili: e non basta quella sottigliezza degli occhi a farlo essere uguale ai suoi: lui ha tralignato, è corso lontano, ha sfiorato

per altri più lunghi sentieri da quelli che incrociano dentro ed attorno al podere dei Frateschi.

A tredici anni Venturino si rifiutava di lavorare la propria terra, preferiva sgobbare su quella degli altri. « Il podere ha bisogno anche di te, non si arriva, lo vedi pure! » diceva il padre. « Non si arriva » ripeteva la madre e lo ripeteva anche il fratello minore. « Io voglio guadagnarmi dei soldi » rispondeva lui senz'altro aggiungere.

E tutte le ragioni ragionevoli non servivano a nulla: « Ma i soldi che guadagni li perde la terra che è nostra e tu lavori quella degli altri ».

« Ma così i soldi che guadagno li intasco io ».

« Ma questa terra è anche tua ». Non c'era nulla che potesse convincerlo e, quando il padre capì che non si poteva renderlo a ragione, s'armò della violenza di cui aveva diritto come capo della famiglia, e che poteva esercitare in ragione della forza e dell'energia di cui era in possesso la sua persona. Di forza Casimiro ne aveva tanta, l'energia era quella naturale al capofamiglia, all'uomo che ha diritto di ricorrere alla forza quando è costretto a constatare, con orrore, che l'antica pianta di cui egli è il ramo principale, la pianta che da secoli ha sempre dato frutti tutti uguali, tutti sani, d'un tratto s'è messa a maturare un parto che non ha nulla in comune con quelli di sempre: si vede una cosa che la ragione non può comprendere né ammettere, una cosa che un uomo come Casimiro rifiuta di credere anche dinnanzi all'evidenza.

La violenza però non servì, Casimiro bastonò il figlio, la madre gridò, si torse le mani, si morse le labbra, ma il suo vero grido dinnanzi al figlio sbagliato fu sempre: « Come un mulo sei, tuo padre ti deve domare ». Un grido al quale seguiva un languore infinito, quasi bestiale d'occhiate, di suppliche mute, di sorrisi tremebondi.

Il bastone prima rese muto il ragazzo, poi determinò le lunghe assenze del giovanottello che, dopo il lavoro a cottimo nei campi altrui, si recava a Pescia, dormiva in alcuni luoghi della periferia, passava qualche serata all'osteria con altri simili a lui ma più grandi. Più tardi il bastone portò a punto la ribellione dell'uomo precoce, una ribellione selvaggia, irragionevole, che non era del tutto creata dal bastone, ma sorgeva da dentro, doveva essere cresciuta in quel petto poderoso, sotto quella fronte fosca eppur degna d'un volto bello e felino come quello del giovane Frateschi.

Fu così che in uno di quei tanti disperati tentativi, quando, al culmine della collera, Casimiro alzò il bastone pronto a battere il ragazzo irragionevole, quello stesso che, come sempre, si sarebbe incurvato, non tanto sotto le percosse quanto sotto il diritto del padrone, del capofamiglia, invece del ragazzo trovò sotto l'arco della sua ira e del

suo bastone, un uomo, un figlio divenuto uomo impetuosamente, fuori tempo, un uomo che invece di piegarsi, invece di chiudere gli occhi, tacere come un grosso animale dominato, si erse impassibile, fermò l'arma punitrice con un gesto che sarebbe stato teatrale se Venturino, a quel tempo, avesse potuto valutare il senso e l'aspetto dei propri gesti, mentre Casimiro d'un tratto sentì che lui, la forza della casa, il padre, il capo, non era più la maggior potenza, il più alto, il più forte, il più autorizzato; la forza dei suoi diritti non bastava più, non sembrava nemmeno più giusta ora che vacillava, e fu la fine.

Venturino divenne padrone di sé, dei propri movimenti, circolò pochissimo e vagamente per la casa, quasi sprezzante, non vide le lacrime della madre, anche lei invecchiata; ed infine sparì, si dileguò a Pescia, nei paesi vicini, oltre la provincia.

IV

Nelle osterie di Pescia, la sera, la notte, specialmente in quella di Fontananova, Venturino aveva imparato molte cose, ne aveva imparate di buone e di cattive, ma il suo istinto solido e quasi infallibile non distingueva affatto il buono dal cattivo mentre mai avrebbe sbagliato d'un nulla nel distinguere l'utile dal superfluo.

A Fontananova, sullo Stradone dove spesso andava in bicicletta con altri, specialmente il sabato, aveva conosciuta molta gente delle campagne circostanti. Era un luogo dove spesso arrivavano anche committive dalla città, una specie di punto d'incontro di gente disparata; dal commerciante di bestiame al giocatore di professione, dal cittadino che cercava evasioni protette dalla solitudine della campagna, al contadino svogliato della terra e viziato dal vino, al camionista di passaggio o la famiglia in gita domenicale. Per la maggior parte però, a sera, il grosso degli avventori era costituito da quei contadini che hanno finito per fuggire la terra ed hanno allacciato affarucci d'ogni genere con le città vicine, grandi e smodati bevitori come divengono quando non amano più il vino come prodotto delle loro fatiche.

I signori che arrivavano spesso in macchina dalla città, quasi sempre accompagnati da donne, si facevano preparare grandi e massicci pranzi nelle sale del primo piano e, mentre sotto si giocava e si faceva baccano urlando fino alla perdizione, sopra, un tramestio d'ubriachi d'un altro ordine comunicava, assieme alla qualità dell'allegria eccitante, un fermento bestiale d'equivoca ed inutile lussuria che induceva chi non giocava a raccontare pesanti avventure femminili vere o inventate. Che occhi lucidi avevano gli uomini dopo la mezzanotte all'osteria di Fontananova! Ed i litri di vino non si contavano più, mentre il

rum, un rum nero sicuramente preparato dall'oste in persona portava al parrossismo il bruciore dei loro stomaci e dei loro occhi. Che facce rosse, che sorrisi, che urla! Eppure i più vecchi, non di rado, ancora portavano il coltello e del coltello si parlava, e dei fatti di coltello, forse assai lontani, i vecchi rivivevano ancora tutte le emozioni: (un ferito di coltello ha sempre taciuto, all'ospedale, non ha mai conosciuto il suo feritore; ma quando guarito se ne andrà, il letto rimasto libero non tarderà ad accogliere un altro ferito di coltello, anche lui ignaro dell'identità del suo aggressore).

Venturino, tra gli amici e tra le conoscenze occasionali di quel luogo sapeva ben farsi una scelta accurata, dando la preferenza a coloro che vestivano meglio degli altri, che avevan sulle vesti odor di città e magari qualche anello d'oro nell'indice. Tra questi gli piaceva ascoltare un certo Giaccai e con lui seppe fare amicizia con la calda abilità dell'adolescente che sa farsi notare, quasi con la stessa sottigliezza della donna furba. Si legò più strettamente al Giaccai quando, una sera, attorno ad una selva di mezzilitri, con un sorrisetto tagliente, impose il silenzio con qualche parola di scherno sulla miseria e sulle fatiche degli altri presenti.

« Che cosa ne sapete voi del mondo » diceva costui.

« Sai tutto tu, già, tu sei il Professore ». Lo chiamavano così da molto tempo tutti quelli che lo conoscevano.

« Vino, vino e rum, vi rovinare lo stomaco e non sapete nulla. Io so quanto basta per lasciare che lavorino gli altri. Chi sa il giuoco non lo insegni, agnellini miei ».

« Hai trovata la miniera d'oro, tu? ».

« Bah, venitemi dietro, mettetemi il sale sulla coda e vedete se vi riesce di scoprirlo. Ma che volete mai imparare voi, ci vuol questo! » e si puntava l'indice sulla fronte precocemente stempiata. « Venite dietro a me e ve lo faccio vedere io come si fa a stare al mondo. Vedete? ». Così dicendo toglieva di tasca un fascio di banconote che, nulla da dire, imponeva un attimo di silenzio. Ma subito dopo:

« Chi fa vedere i soldi fa vedere il giudizio ».

« Guardatelo allora il mio giudizio, non mi pare che sia poco, no? ».

« Ma dove li prendi? » e con questa domanda cambiava il tono di tutta la conversazione, benché non ci fosse davvero troppo da sperare che il Professore si sbottonasse.

Una sera invece, anche lui aveva bevuto vino e rum, rum e vino ed era fuori di sé, tirava calci alle sedie, dava spintoni a chi gli stava vicino, dava noia a tutti, ma infine, senza accorgersene forse, stava rivelando qualche cosa dei suoi segreti, si vantava come al solito, ma cantava. « Silenzio! ».

« Lo vedete questo? voi non lo avete e non lo avrete mai un libretto come questo, voi non avete messo mai il naso fuori del paesello, ma io il mondo lo giro, con questo ». Era un passaporto per l'estero.

« Veramente lo presi per andare a lavorare in Francia dove ci ha una sorella sposata; ma non ho lavorato troppo io, non mi sono scippato. Mi son imparato un buon mestiere che non sciupa le mani ».

« E dillo allora ».

« È semplice semplice; si prende un pacchettino di dolci, come li vendono in città, eppoi bisogna aver di questi... soldi, baiocchi, soldoni buoni, e col pacchettino di dolci si raddoppiano, si viaggia, si gonfia fino a che non ce n'è quanti ne occorre per infischiarli di tutti ».

« Un pacchettino di dolci? ».

« Ma sì, un pacchettino di dolci da portare alla sorella sposata in Francia, alla padrona di casa; dolci del mio paesello, vengono da lontano, un regalo gradito all'estero; tutti li portano quando ritornano al lavoro nelle miniere; vanno alle miniere. Io la mia miniera me la porto con me; basta accomodare tutta la moneta sotto i dolci, nascosta dentro al cartone del vassoio, basta avere una bella faccia, un bel sorriso così, vedete? Poi: Buongiorno, questi sono dolci del mio paesello, li porto alla mia padrona di casa, buoni, ne vuole uno, no? prego; arrivarla. Fatto. Ma se lo faceste voi tra l'altro ci rimettereste anche i soldi del treno; che ne sapete del cambio, delle quotazioni di borsa? A modo mio anch'io giuoco in borsa ».

« Che borsa, giuocare? ».

« Ma andate a zappare la terra, che ne potete sapere voi. Io viaggiando vedo il mondo, un pacchettino di dolci, buongiorno, buonasera; e vedete qui con le toppe ai calzoni ».

A dir la verità, malgrado qualche strana velleità di fazzoletti di seta stretti attorno al collo, malgrado che alcuni abbiano anche la giacca, gli avventori dell'osteria di Fontananova sono un popolo di scamiciati di straccioni o poco meno. Venturino non aveva nemmeno la giacca, non ne aveva mai posseduta una, eppoi malgrado tutto, era un ragazzo quasi un bambino, un bambino il cui cervello funzionava come uno strumento di precisione. All'osteria lui faceva poco rumore, se ne stava attento come il giovanetto diligente nella scuola.

Si fece amico del Professore il quale aveva certa perspicacia, almeno quanta ne occorreva per capire che quel ragazzo era fatto di una stoffa adattabile a qualsiasi circostanza pur di concludere qualche cosa che gli tornasse utile; glielo leggeva negli occhi, in quello sguardo che ogni tanto si allargava scoprendo zone d'ombra indecifrabili, disponibili; ed il professore, i begli occhi di Venturino li aveva guardati molto spesso a lungo. Si erano intesi.

V

Occorreva fare il passaporto e non fu del tutto facile per Venturino, ma il Giaccai sapeva bene aiutarlo. Occorsero anche le firme dei genitori di Venturino che era minorenne, ed in quell'occasione, il ragazzo, li vide per l'ultima volta.

A quel tempo Venturino faceva il facchino in una cartiera, andava ad opre nei poderi, passava la notte nelle osterie; ma una cruda ostinazione che quasi poteva sembrar saggio controllo, l'induceva a risparmiare ed a non eccedere in nulla; anche all'osteria non gli era mai accaduto di bere un bicchiere di troppo o di lasciarsi trascinare dalle intemperanze della maggioranza dei suoi compagni. Era come se stesse nell'aspettativa di soluzioni diverse, in quell'attesa che, comunque, presto o tardi, sembra mai deludere gli uomini tenaci.

Cominciò a fare qualche viaggio col Professore; non andavano assieme, ma passavano la frontiera nella stessa giornata in due ore diverse; i primi tempi Venturino portava il denaro del suo maestro e vi aveva aggiunto un poco del suo che ben presto cominciò a crescere con una certa celerità. Il professore gli aveva comprata la prima giacca, ma non tardò il momento che ne ebbe due, e scarpe leggere e cravatte un poco vistose. Imparò anche a disbrigarsi da solo; ma il Giaccai per molto tempo lo volle legato a sé, non tanto perché l'aiutasse nel lavoro, quanto perché vedeva con certa gelosa apprensione il rapido emanciparsi del ragazzo ch'egli teneva sempre vicino. Parigi e Pescia per diversi anni furono tutto il mondo di Venturino, un mondo che si completava, una scuola impareggiabile.

« Un lavoretto istruttivo, non ti sembra, passerotto? » gli diceva il professore stupito di veder il suo impacciato contadino trasformarsi rapidamente in un bellissimo giovanotto che sapeva il fatto suo, anche se spesso pareva impossibile penetrare fino in fondo a quello sguardo che, mentre sembrava stesse a disposizione, ogni tanto diveniva vago e preoccupante, fisso.

« Ti sei fatto volone ormai » gli disse un giorno il professore. « Volone » l'aveva detto in un bar dove avevano cambiato la valuta con gli incettatori del Giaccai, mentre bevevano il pernod. Pernod al posto del litro bollato dall'intendenza di finanza; « volone » è una parola che a Pescia la si usa per gli uccelli di nido quando sono pronti a spiccare il volo perché hanno messo tutte le penne e volano nei campi, nelle siepi e sui tetti. I campi, i boschi, le bottiglie di litro bollate dall'Intendenza di finanza, i viaggi, Pescia. Quante cose!

« Oh, mi senti, abbiamo guadagnato tutti questi ».

« Ti sento, ti sento, ho contato con te ». Venturino aveva messo le ali.

VI

Imparò a volare da solo. « La scuola della vita comincia ad essere proficua quando ci si emancipa dai maestri ». Sembra impossibile, eppure questa fu una frase che Venturino ventenne coniò per proprio conto. In realtà non sarebbe stato facile emanciparsi dal Giaccai, ed i suoi obblighi l'avrebbero costretto ad esser soggetto chi sa quanto ancora alla sua volontà ed a lavorare sotto la sua direzione; ma proprio in quel tempo divenne più facile perché il Giaccai da qualche parte aveva trovato un altro giovanissimo allievo da istruire, ed allora fu quasi lui stesso che aiutò Venturino a decidere di sbrigarsela da solo.

Venturino si perfezionava; tutte le strade sono buone quando s'impara la tecnica giusta per percorrerle evitando ogni pericolo. La sua era un'esistenza che si perfezionava con una rapidità eccezionale; una vita da piccolo avventuriero avveduto come un saggio bottegaio, egli si teneva ancora ben saldo entro i rigori dell'astuzia e della durezza contadina di cui era figlio e malgrado tante esperienze, spesso di quelle che entrano nel sangue come veleno sottile, pareva che nulla l'avesse potuto scalfire e si sarebbe detto che era uscito incontaminato anche dalla necessaria accettazione di tante sdruciolevoli accondiscendenze: egli lavorava con la sagacia del buon commerciante che calcola ogni aspetto dei suoi affari prima di intraprenderli.

Col tempo, abbinati alle sue brillanti operazioni di cambio, si erano naturalmente affiancati discreti piccoli commerci che, sulla via del ritorno, potevano far ancora fruttare il denaro guadagnato. Calze di seta, lucenti e trasparenti, profumi di cui Venturino aveva imparato a pronunciare i nomi ed anche a capirne il significato, fatti passare abilmente con tutti i mezzi di cui ormai era maestro, rappresentavano il lavoro di rincalzo.

Le calze lo condussero assai lontano. Furon le calze infatti ad inaugurare un nuovo periodo della sua vita, quella specie di parentesi, di sosta, di trapasso; una strana stagione che pareva portata dal caso, e invece non era che il maggiore anello di congiunzione, il più importante, perché dal ragazzo uscisse l'uomo e, dal contadino, l'individuo esperto. Una strana stagione, sì, redditizia tra l'altro, giacché la fortuna certi li assiste in ogni momento, mentre certi li abbandona sul ciglio dei fiumi, sui ponti delle strade ferrate. Le calze, dopo che erano « entrate » bastava portarle ad un certo tipo di Torino: pagava bene, guadagno certo e nulla chiedeva.

Quel tipo che acquistava le calze doveva pur guadagnarci a sua volta, allora, per Venturino, a sua volta, si trattava di sapere come faceva a guadagnarci. Un po' di tempo, un poco di scaltrezza, finì per sapere dove andavano a sistemarsi i prodotti parigini: le calze andavano ad arricchire l'assortimento d'un bel negozio di via Roma, piuttosto

piccolo ma vistoso, con insegne luminose, servito da due commesse in tenuta con tanto di scritta sul petto: « Mary ».

Così la volta seguente, l'uomo che comprava aspettò invano la solita valigetta di merce, perché Venturino andò direttamente dove ormai sapeva. Ma l'impresa non fu facile.

Mary, calze e guanti c'era scritto sul vetro della vetrina a caratteri d'ottone incollati, c'era scritto nell'insegna al neon, sulle etichette applicate alla merce esposta.

« Signorina potrei parlare col principale? » Venturino si era presentato al negozio senza valigetta, voleva rendersi conto e, del resto, era più prudente.

« Ora non c'è, ma dica pure a me » rispose la commessa.

« No, vorrei parlare proprio col proprietario. Ho della merce che potrebbe interessarlo ».

« Se vuole mi faccia vedere, poi riferirò ».

« Più tardi tornerò, debbo parlare col principale ».

« Col principale » disse la ragazza forse non senza una certa ironia.

Più tardi il principale pareva non ci fosse, ma dopo un poco, da una tenda messa tra due scaffali in fondo al negozio, si fece avanti una donna, forse giovane, elegante, col labbro sottile ben dipinto, l'occhio stretto, ed una lucida capigliatura tirata dietro la nuca. Il tipo di donna che aveva sempre messo una certa soggezione al giovane pesciatino. Dinnanzi a lei che dichiarò di essere il principale, per un attimo Venturino fu impacciatissimo; sarà stato un attimo, ma basta tanto poco perché una donna si accorga di questo e di altro, quando osserva un uomo. Un uomo; per lei doveva essere quasi un bambino quell'essere grande e grosso, con quelle spalle. L'abito di Venturino non lasciava affatto a desiderare, era in ordine, ma c'era pur qualche cosa che denunciava la sua appartenenza contadina, oltre che la provenienza da qualche grande magazzino di vestiti confezionati in serie. Comunque sulle spalle di un ragazzo tagliato così, anche una giacca comprata ai grandi magazzini finisce per non mancare di grazia. Gli occhi di una donna vedono molto e a prima vista, in questi casi, ed infatti la proprietaria del negozio, dopo un attimo di esitazione, gli rivolse la parola con un tono che certamente era stato lì per lì calcolato su misura.

« Grazie giovanotto, mi proponete della merce che io ormai, da anni acquisto da un importatore di mia fiducia, mi servo da lui da molto ed è l'uomo adatto a trattare una merce del genere. Proprio non mi occorre nulla. Grazie ».

Venturino aveva voluto però riacquistare tutta la calma necessaria: come gli succedeva nei casi di maggiore impegno, allo stesso modo che tanti si raccomandano al proprio santo protettore, lui l'ausilio lo andava a cercare lontano: era come se andasse a frugare nel segreto di una coscienza non del tutto esplorata di cui però conosceva l'esistenza:

d'un balzo, lasciandosi sprofondare si ritrovava tra i colli del suo paese là dove la gente è curva sui campi, dove si parla di orti e di boscelli dove si tace, ma si è sottili d'antica esperienza, antichi e sagaci tanto da sapere che in certi casi, frugando in fondo al proprio cuore, troverà ciò che serve, la sapienza necessaria a risolvere d'istinto. Riussì a formulare un sorriso fresco e giovanile di cui sarebbe stato il primo a meravigliarsi, se lo avesse potuto vedere, e con voce del tutto alterata ma non stupidamente intonata, disse:

« Signora, io però vorrei permettermi di consigliarle di prendere in considerazione la mia proposta. Sono certo che vi troverà dei vantaggi e glielo dico perché ho qualche elemento che mi autorizza a crederlo ».

« Potrà anche darsi, giovanotto, ma non tutte le cose che convergono si possono fare. Lei m'intende certamente. Poi, guardi, il mio fornitore importa sempre per me la quantità che mi occorre, ormai siamo affiatati, non vedo proprio perché dovrei cambiare ».

« Vede, potrebbe anche darsi che da un momento all'altro al suo importatore venissero a mancare proprio quei quantitativi che io posso offrirle ».

« Lei ha con sé quella roba? ».

« All'albergo, posso fargliela vedere in pochi minuti, la porto qui? ».

« Ma io non ho detto che m'interessa ».

« Io però penso seriamente che lei possa immaginare ci debba essere una certa convenienza a prendere le mie calze ».

« Ammettiamo, ma, lei non si deve offendere, la provenienza? ».

Qui a Venturino occorre un attimo di riflessione, poi disse semplicemente:

« Le posso assicurare che le mie calze sono importate con le stesse regole e con la stessa scrupolosa precisione di quelle che lei acquista da anni dal suo fornitore abituale ».

« Dicevo solo perché conosco molte cose, su questo argomento ».

« Me lo auguro, potrò così essere sicuro d'averla per affezionato cliente ».

La signora Mary, il nome era suo, ma in realtà si chiamava Marianna, non diede risposta, fece finta di interessarsi ad altro, poi volse distrattamente lo sguardo verso Venturino come se fosse ormai distratto da altri pensieri e disse:

« Bene, allora vediamo, potrebbe anche essere conveniente ».

« Signora, vado e torno, ho anche dei profumi, se la interessassero ».

Non soltanto la signora, quando Venturino lasciò il negozio, lo seguì con lo sguardo e con un sorriso, discreto ma sensibile; anche le due ragazze, pur dietro a servire due clienti, volsero gli occhi per un momento sulle spalle del ragazzo che, un sorriso, sia pur discreto, lo strappava per forza, ad una donna. Eppure questa era l'unica cosa che Venturino non sapeva bene, aveva sempre pensato ad altro.

VII

Fu assai difficile eliminare il vecchio intermediario il quale capì assai presto d'aver perduto un importatore ed un cliente nello stesso momento; ma Venturino questa volta non aveva soltanto da salvare un guadagno maggiorato, perciò, con l'astuzia, la violenza, poi con il compromesso, fece in modo che anche questa prepotenza, nei confronti di certe regole di reciproco rispetto che anche in quel campo erano molto importanti, si risolvesse senza ch'egli ne ricevesse danno alcuno. Anche da questa faccenda Venturino ne uscì convinto d'aver fatto molt'altra strada, persuaso che un bel giovanotto ha qualche cosa da imparare, finché non sa accorgersi dell'impressione che fa sulle donne e finché non impara a servirsi dei poteri che gliene derivano.

Marianna non era una donna qualunque, ed inoltre a Venturino destò un interesse diverso da quello che aveva dedicato alle donne fino allora incontrate, perché, senza saperne bene la ragione, senza nemmeno poter stabilire se era vero, a lui era sembrato di trovar qualche cosa di curiosamente comune tra lei ed il Giacciai. Era una sensazione strana che però lo indusse a considerare Marianna con un interesse particolare.

La donna? Venturino le donne non aveva ancora imparato a guardarle, non sapeva nemmeno come si aprono gli occhi su di loro. Nella donna, Venturino intuiva appena il profumo o l'apparenza o, magari, la sostanza di un mondo completamente ignoto e che pure aveva sentito così sovente agitarglisi attorno. Marianna per lui era la donna elegante, ma soprattutto quella che lui chiamava una signora, senza rendersi conto che riproduceva il gusto stesso d'una certa leziosa espressione borghese; essa aveva una fortuna, una casa, degli amici, una discreta educazione, tutte cose che Venturino non conosceva ma apprezzava, non tanto come le apprezza il diseredato, o l'uomo la cui educazione non lo ha mai condotto a realizzare quei benefici, ma come l'uomo che è nel diritto di possedere quegli elementi per la propria vita e per cui l'esserne privato, oltre che una ingiustizia, rappresenta soltanto uno stato transitorio, l'attesa del momento in cui il destino corra ai ripari.

A lei Venturino si affidò proprio negli stessi termini coi quali si era affidato al Professore, lasciò fare, si lasciò formare, guidare, sicuro che c'era tutto da guadagnare, dimostrandosi in ogni occasione acccondiscendente ed ignaro. Furono gli anni della sua alta scuola e si abbandonò a tutte le esigenze del mondo che l'attornia, come lo scolaro diligente e consapevole si abbandona a quella disciplina dalla quale sa che poi trarrà i maggiori benefici della sua esistenza. Nello stesso tempo, trovandosi in mezzo ad affari assai più sostanziosi di quelli a cui era abituato, e per giunta, malgrado quel liberaleggiare.

negli acquisti che l'aveva appunto condotto fin là, puliti, sicuri, cominciò ad applicare la propria attività e la propria energia agli interessi di Marianna, allargandone rapidamente il raggio, ed affiancandola a una industria di maglieria. Loro due marciarono assieme e la via divenne con loro piacevole e generosa.

VIII

Il giovane Frateschi non aveva dato fino ad allora nessuna importanza ad altro che al suo traffico, agli insegnamenti del professore sorvolando su tutte le altre cose della sua vita pur di impossessarsene, diciamo così, del mestiere. Quando il suo maestro gli faceva notare che lui piaceva molto alle donne; quando, e accadeva sovente, lo incitava a seguirlo anche in certe allegre notti che avrebbe voluto passare, oltre che con lui, anche con qualche ragazza compiacente a Parigi, a Milano, od a Torino, Venturino si esimeva come fosse stato estremamente pudico o molto timido, mentre in realtà era sempre stato pronto a tutto, quando la cosa da farsi poteva essere utile. Che le donne lo guardavano molto se ne accorgeva, nemmeno gli dispiaceva di accorgersi, o magari di apprendere direttamente che molte di esse valutavano in lui un desiderabile compagno; ma non trovando nella loro compagnia nulla che potesse convenirgli, ignorava spinte di altro ordine che proprio riuscissero a smuoverlo quanto occorreva. Aveva da lavorare e non gli era mai passata per la testa la possibilità di farsi una compagna, né permanente né passeggera. All'occasione naturalmente poteva comportarsi con le donne con una disinvoltura che riusciva sempre ad ingannarle sulle sue esperienze, mentre era una disinvoltura approssimativa, orecchiata intelligentemente e riprodotta nelle manifestazioni esteriori più facili.

Anche con Marianna, un poco più vecchia di lui e certamente più consapevole in ogni senso, Venturino si comportò nel medesimo modo, ma con un riserbo estremo, intuendo che in questo caso non sarebbero bastati alcuni atteggiamenti esteriori. In questa occasione però vi fece qualche cosa di più, ed in ogni accorgimento da lui adoprato per avvicinarsi all'a bella donna egli ritrovava un'esperienza già fatta: come aveva conquistato il Giaccai e l'aveva indotto a prenderlo con sé. Comunque in un primo tempo fu lieto di aver da coltivare una clientela preziosa, infine il personaggio che apparteneva ad un mondo a cui guardava come dovesse essere il suo, di diritto, oppure, forse, a cui guardava come al mondo entro il quale avrebbe potuto in qualche modo crescere e prosperare.

Col passare dei mesi i rapporti di affari tra loro due si strinsero e divennero amichevoli finché, una sera, Venturino fu invitato a cenare

da Marianna. Abitava in una bella casa isolata in un giardinetto a Villa della Regina; una casa a due piani. Marianna era una donna di gusto, una borghese bene allevata, diceva ella stessa, imbarazzando il ragazzo con l'oscuro senso di quella frase. La sua casa aveva un certo tono che a Venturino, anche se si guardava attorno indifferente come se tutto ciò gli fosse più che abituale, penetrò nel cuore profondamente, agì sul suo cervello, mise perfino in moto una specie di calcolatrice che abitava in qualche angolo dei suoi centri nervosi, ed infine l'indusse a sentirsi disponibile come non lo era mai stato, remissivo fino all'estremo, diciamo addirittura passivo completamente.

Alle ore ed alle mezze ore una grande pendola, situata a metà della scala che conduceva al piano di sopra, si metteva a suonare; era come una voce misteriosa che risvegliava ogni cellula del suo essere e lo colmava di gioia, appagamento.

Oh quell'orologio! fu alla sua voce che Venturino si abbandonò quando rimase solo con Marianna, fu al ritmo della suadente sonorità che uniformò il ritmo d'ogni suo pensiero di quella sera così importante; e quando Marianna seppe accoglierlo quasi come una madre affettuosa tra le sue braccia generose, per lui fu come se avesse rimesso tutto il senso della propria esistenza alla voce del grande orologio Luigi XVI.

Venturino rinunciava per il momento a rendersi conto delle cose, ma anche quando credette di aver capito, di essersi impossessato di tutto ciò che la nuova situazione gli offriva, mai riuscì a capire che in quegli anni egli aveva trovato una madre, una sorella, un'amante ed una moglie: una vita.

I

Un buco nel giornale; eppure qualche cosa di più che un semplice avvedimento, che una bizzarra invenzione. — Certo, forse soltanto perché mi permette di vedere meglio e di più; forse perché non ne posso più. La mia vita sembra finita ormai. Ma di che mi lamento, sono ricco e di tutto, nulla m'importa. — Era violento questo pensiero nella dura testa di Venturino.

A Pescia, anche sulla piazza il cielo è quello della campagna, con quel lindore che tanto verde comunica allo spazio, anche se, di verde, dalla piazza non se ne veda. Di verde è assediata la città, gli orti ed i campi la toccano da tutte le parti, mentre i colli le chiudono l'orizzonte con un altro verde più scuro a contatto del cielo. Anche sotto le case di Pescia la terra è la stessa, terra benedetta per chi lavora, mai avara con chi le concede la vita.

La terra dei Frateschi, quel bel podere così ben distribuito, così lungamente lavorato da tante generazioni della stessa gente, però non dimostrava davvero alcuna generosità per colui che la vita gliela aveva data tutta e su di essa aveva piegato la schiena in due come una squadra, fedele e pronto a tutto, affinché pur mangiandosi la sua vita e quella della famiglia, la ridonasse quasi festosamente. Da molti anni il padre di Venturino non aveva più energia da spendere, anche se dall'alba al tramonto trascorreva le ore attorno ai campi; la moglie era vecchia, sembrava anzi più vecchia di lui; la nuora non lo era, ma sembrava anche lei vecchia perché non si era risparmiata per la terra e, dopo la partenza ed in seguito la morte di suo marito, essa aveva tentato di rimpiazzare con le proprie forze la perdita dell'unico uomo valido della famiglia. La nipote era bionda, delicata, e quel suo aspetto inusitato, gentile, quella sua presenza solitaria nella casa dei vecchi, aveva contribuito a crescerla distaccata dalle esigenze della terra. Ma non solo le sue caratteristiche l'avevano distaccata dall'usuale vita contadina, anche i due vecchi e la madre, fin quando avevano potuto, pareva avessero fatto a gara affinché i campi non si mangias-

sero velocemente la sua delicatezza, la sua bellezza che aveva avuto un potere continuo ed un fascino sottile e costante presso di loro; era infatti diversa, era anche lei, a suo modo, qualche cosa che tralignava dalle secolari e consuete caratteristiche dei Frateschi.

Un podere come quello dei Frateschi, che si regge sulla bontà dei campi, sulla possibilità d'irrigazione, sulla coltivazione intensiva anche se relativamente estesa, chiede tutto a chi lo cura; vuole la vita perché a sua volta la dia. Un eterno scambio, duro ma sicuro, un contratto che funziona finché la parte più interessata ne rispetta tutte le leggi. Ora le braccia dei Frateschi erano ridotte solo a quelle due scheletrite del vecchio Casimiro ed al debole complemento femminile della taciturna nuora. Non bastavano, e la terra non rispondeva più se non con un magro compenso del tutto pari alla povera sostanza delle cure che pur riceveva assidue. Si sarebbe potuto ricorrere al lavoro altrui, ma in un podere di quel genere, così poco esteso, a carattere del tutto familiare, chiamare a lavorarvi gente pagata equivaleva press'a poco a ripagare appena il compenso. Così la terra dei Frateschi sembrava inaridita, come inaridita era la famiglia senza più il sostegno della generazione che già avrebbe dovuto essere subentrata. Il declino era stato lento, aveva seguito l'affievolirsi dell'energie di Casimiro. In un primo tempo si era trattato di un lieve disagio, poi di qualche privazione che, ad ogni raccolto, si delineava sempre maggiore, finché ad un certo punto sembrava avesse ormai toccato il massimo, il limite ultimo; ma non c'è limite in queste cose, nuove privazioni ne conducevano altre ancora e quando sembrava che si fosse arrivati al punto in cui si pensa che non sia impossibile andare più in basso, no, c'era ancora possibilità di discendere di più: non ha fondo l'abisso che porta gli uomini alle loro sofferenze, alle loro prove estreme.

La voce della casa già tanto calma, quasi inesistente, si era affievolita, le abitudini si erano ridotte, il pasto una volta preparato sulla tovaglia di canapa s'era ridotto al pane e cipolle consumato dall'orlo della sedia o sul gradino della soglia della porta; ormai in quella casa le rinunce avevano distrutto tutto, ed un silenzio straziante veniva ad unirsi alla sconsolatezza ed all'abbandono; ma entro tutto ciò la vita, anziché piegarsi si fa cocciuta, si arma di una caparbieta che forse è l'orgoglio di una nobile razza irreparabilmente decaduta; è come una protesta muta, interiore, assurda, di chi forse si innalza sempre più nel proprio cuore quanto più attorno a lui tutto è indice di decadenza.

In questa situazione d'infinita malinconia, di apparente rassegnazione, la fanciulla bionda, anche lei trascinata sulla scia delle sventure familiari, sembrava tuttavia estranea; essaolgeva il proprio pensiero ed il senso di ogni suo gesto in una direzione diversa. Nata'ina non avrebbe saputo, nemmeno volendo, sottostare al sentimento d'irreparabile decadenza e d'impietrita protesta dei suoi familiari coi quali di-

videva ogni disagio. Forse perché in un essere giovane come lei permangono ancora vergini risorser di gratuite speranze, forse perché aveva un poco studiato in città dalle monache; forse perché era stata tenuta dai familiari lontana dalla partecipazione attiva alla vita dei campi, rimaneva tutt'ora rivolta verso zone diverse, sconosciute, ma situate lontano da quella unica in cui si erano inceppati i suoi vecchi. Infatti i suoi ragionamenti erano diversi da quelli dei vecchi così fatali, uguali in tutte e tre le teste anche se mai se li erano comunicati una volta; ciò che passava nella mente della fanciulla era un ragionamento grezzo, incompleto, mentre ciò che passava nella testa degli altri tre era uno stillicidio continuo di ricordi muti, visivi, accettato quasi come una condanna, una espiatione di chi sa quali colpe che non avevano commesso, accettato senza rancore, ma bloccato nell'impietramento del proprio essere.

Da due generazioni s'era dunque infiltrato un rivolo di vita che non seguiva più il secolare percorso del torrente della loro esistenza; qualche cosa aveva cambiato direzione, un Frateschi non sapeva nemmeno più dell'esistenza della famiglia e viveva ricco e potente, come un essere nato dal nulla; Natalina, anche lei, senza volere, era costretta a guardare come degli estranei quelle uniche persone a cui era legata e che pur amava e le facevano pietà: lei, di se stessa non sentiva mai pietà, come se non si accorgesse della esistenza crudele ch'ella pur in tutto divideva. Essa sentiva ogni privazione come una mutilazione dei suoi diritti, di certi slanci caldi e profondi che si proiettavano verso il vuoto; i vecchi accettavano la fatalità come delle statue corrose dai secoli accettano le ingiurie del temporale, essa accettava le stesse cose con una incoscia e sdegnata indifferenza. Del resto, da qualche tempo, nel suo cervello veniva formulandosi qualche idea che sempre più la estraniava da quei luoghi. Cautamente i suoi pensieri si distaccavano dalla casa, si allontanavano e già misuravano l'ignoto d'una impresa.

Non era di propria volontà che creava questi vaghi pensieri, essi le nascevano dentro senza che avesse il tempo di accorgersene e, quando il dado fu tratto, lei stessa dovè meravigliarsi di ciò che l'era nato in cuore come se qualcuno ve lo avesse messo dall'esterno.

« Vado a trovarlo io quello sciagurato ».

II

« È inutile che tu ridacchi, meglio adoprare il tempo nelle cose in cui lo spendo io e che tu non puoi capire, che vegetare con chi sa quali pensieri. Chi sa quali ».

« Che pensieri intendi? »

« Chi sa che cosa pensi te; nessuno lo sa, ma io avrei paura d'aver per la testa le cose che ci hai tu. Le mie almeno... ».

« Che intendi dire. Lasciamo correre, va, tanto sarai sempre il solito... ».

« Non mi offendere perché me ne vado; te lo dico tutti i giorni, ognuno è libero di fare quello che vuole e tu non hai diritto di ridere ».

« Io, caro il mio scienziato, se i diritti non me li fossi creati chi sa dove sarei ancora; invece son qui e nessuno mi detta legge. O te la fai la legge per conto tuo, o gli altri la fanno per te, te lo dico ancora. Oggi non ho bisogno di nessuno, io ».

« Un tavolino sul marciapiede di Piazza Grande e la giornata per non sapere di che cosa farne, ecco quello che hai. Per te lavorano gli altri ».

« Io le mie giornate le ho avute, un anno della mia vita vale più dell'esistenza di dieci come te, di tutta quella della gente che abita in questo buco ».

« E perché tu ci stai, perché non te ne vai. Vale la pena di star qui per sputare sempre addosso a tutti? Bah, ma a che prò, meglio che io mi interessi ai miei colloidali. A proposito, sai che ho ridotto l'oro in proporzioni colloidali; ora sta in sospensione nell'acqua. Sembra una cosa da nulla; ma pensa la meraviglia della struttura della materia, l'energia... ».

« Vai al diavolo, ti porteranno al manicomio un giorno ».

« Sarai sempre il solito volgarissimo uomo che non... » Francesco parlava con la solita stizza, Venturino invece parlava con calma, non eccessivamente ironico; sorrise poi, era felice quando l'omino lasciava i propri intrugli per raggiungerlo al caffè, perché poteva ridurlo in quello stato di rabbia dinnanzi al quale si sentiva a suo agio. Quando lo vedeva paonazzo con le vene gonfie sulle tempie, — Arteriosclerosi — pensava.

Ma ad un certo punto, sul far della sera finivano sempre per tacere. Venturino riprendeva la lettura della *Nazione*, leggeva ed ogni tanto dal suo segreto spiraglio inquadrava qualche particolare della piazza a quell'ora più animata del solito.

« Guardala, la moglie del medico, va in chiesa, anche suo marito va in chiesa eppoi ammazza i cristiani ».

« Fanno bene ad andare in chiesa, è gente per bene, quella ».

« Gente per bene. Dov'è la gente per bene, voglio conoscerla la gente per bene, voglio conoscerla. Stupido! Gente per bene. Chi sa di che sarebbero capaci per dar marito alla figlia ».

« Sì gente per bene; che ti credi, c'è la gente per bene. Se il mondo fosse fatto tutto di gente come te io non ci potrei stare ».

« Infatti non ci stai, ti credi di stare al mondo anche te? Eppure non ti accorgi che le tue ore le passi proprio solo con me? »

« Sì, è vero, intanto, per cominciare, me ne vado, è meglio; del resto si è fatto tardi ». Francesco si alzò di scatto, stizzito come ogni volta. Venturino lo guardò allontanarsi. Non si salutavano mai.

« Si ammalerà anche di fegato » disse forte Venturino guardando il piccolo uomo che attraversava la piazza: — Lo salutano tutti, guardateli, il droghiere, il giornalaio, anche il barbiere. Ma pure me salutano questi cialtroni, s'intende salutano pure me.—

La sera era scesa rapidamente con quella lucentezza vivida che l'ultima luce, ormai incapace di contrasti, spande sulle cose quasi dilatatando lo spazio; un rapido illuminarsi di tutto prima che il turchinello della notte spenga le cose conducendole verso il buio. Attraverso il buco nel giornale, isolare a quell'ora una zona centrale della piazza, produceva effetti inaspettati d'insolita dolcezza di forme e di colori che non sfuggivano alla sensibilità di Venturino il quale ne ricavava un momento di abbandono, di salutare piacere.

Ma nel pertugio segreto s'inquadrò a qualche decina di metri una singolare figuretta di contadina, malmessa in una veste stinta, con le braccia lunghe troppo nude, le gambe di adolescente troppo scoperte; eppure avanzava a passo sicuro e quasi studiato e la sua andatura che non somigliava a quella delle contadine, attrasse vagamente l'interesse di Venturino. Era bionda, i capelli le ricadevano sulle spalle lisci e scomposti, e quel biondo lucente sembrava in grande contrasto con tutto il resto, in quel paese dove le donne bionde così sono rare. Anzi, non contrastava con tutto il resto, c'era il volto, ovale, lungo, col naso diritto, con due tenere sopracciglia molto arcuate, due occhi stinti e chiari, la bocca sembrava sigillata da due segni che la rialzavano alati in un'onda di femminilità dolce e inquietante. Un volto liso, specchio d'una vita stentata che pur aggiungeva soavità alla sua bellezza. Venturino, con quella sua fulminea rapidità di pensiero ebbe modo di considerare tutto questo della singolare figura che camminava dritta verso di lui, e perché un suo breve sguardo abbracciava d'un sol tratto un complesso assieme di cose. La ragazza s'era come volutamente inquadrata nell'orbita del suo obbiettivo e vi persisteva avanzando, come cercasse lui. Capi poi, un attimo appresso, che veramente veniva a lui quando un brusco scarto a cui l'obbligò un tavolo del caffè situato a pochi passi dal suo, troncò le sue considerazioni e, nell'attimo seguente, davanti al buco ebbe solo una parte della veste stinta. La fanciulla era lì, ferma; Venturino abbassò subito il giornale e pensò che stesse per chiedergli l'elemosina, benché i mendicanti in quella regione fossero piuttosto rari; poi l'idea non gli sembrò del tutto logica quando si trovò sotto lo sguardo triste e quasi duro di quella creatura, uno sguardo che non si sapeva dove prendesse certa

pungente vivezza, giacché i suoi occhi sembravano di smalto. Non seppe che cosa domandare, s'oscurò in volto senza sapere perché, ma la ragazza disse:

« Vorrei parlare con voi ».

« Perché con me, che ti occorre? »

« Parlare ».

La voce era leggermente stridula, da adolescente, ma la parlata dolce ed assai meglio cadenzata di quella dei contadini si addiceva alla dolcezza miserevole di quell'essere che stava lì, immobile, con le braccia inerti lungo i fianchi nascosti da quella specie di grembiale a sacco che la vestiva.

« Ma che parlare ».

« Sono la figlia di vostro fratello e voglio parlare con voi ».

Il volto oscuro di Venturino ebbe un lampo, un fulmineo passaggio di due o tre espressioni diverse che si accavallarono con una violenta rapidità che sarebbe sfuggita anche all'occhio più attento. Comunque qualche cosa tra l'ira e lo stupore, tra il risentimento e l'imbarazzo.

« Che vuoi, chi ti manda? »

« Nessuno mi manda, son io che voglio parlare ».

Era rimasta ferma, rigida, ma padrona d'ogni emozione come se fosse estremamente indifferente o lontana.

« Ma non qui perdio! vai a casa mia ». La ragazza si voltò immediatamente e se ne andò; s'era scostata di appena pochi passi quando Venturino domandò ancora:

« Ma lo sai dov'è? »

Vide la testa della ragazza scuotersi in segno d'assenso senza che si voltasse, mentre se ne andava con lo stesso passo con cui era giunta fin lì.

III

In casa dei Frateschi da anni ormai non si parlava più di Venturino, non tanto perché era un figlio perduto, non per rancore, quanto perché apparteneva ai ricordi del passato e i contadini, più spesso, ritornano solo in segreto, sul passato. Eppoi di lui, nessuno avrebbe più osato rammentare l'esistenza da quando era tornato a Pescia. Era tornato da dieci anni, ricco, aveva una fabbrica, veniva da lontano e la sua condizione di ricco era una barriera ancora più insormontabile di tutto il passato.

Per Natalina però le cose stavano diversamente; quasi avrebbe ignorato l'esistenza di suo zio, che mai gliene avevano parlato in casa, se

molti contadini dei dintorni, i quali non avrebbero mai affrontato un argomento del genere con Casimiro, con lei invece non avessero amato parlarne; essa aveva perciò potuto apprendere tutto su suo zio, anche perché i contadini, vedendo che lei prendeva interesse all'argomento, vi tornavano volentieri, ed una volta cominciato era difficile fermarli come se avessero paura di non aver detto tutto. « È un delinquente » concludevano, « Dio lo punirà ».

Natalina se ne stava seduta su una sedia appoggiata alla parete ed aspettava inerte, con lo sguardo fisso dinnanzi senza nemmeno la curiosità di guardarsi attorno. A casa, mentre stava uscendo, al nonno aveva detto:

« Vado a trovare tuo figlio ».

Ed era fuggita mentre, dopo un silenzio assai lungo, la voce roca del vecchio l'aveva seguita chiamandola disperatamente: « Natalina! Natalina! » ma lei era sparita alla svolta dello Stradone.

V'era silenzio attorno a lei, un silenzio profondo nel quale si sentiva bene, ed aspettava calma e priva di pensieri. Aveva già pensato anche troppo a quel momento, ed ora se ne stava lì quasi senza aver coscienza dell'attesa, immobile anche nel volto oscurato dalla scarsa luce della stanza. Soltanto quando suonò il campanello, quando udì i passi del ragazzo che si affrettava ad aprire, si mosse appena. Agostino balbettò incerto: « C'è di là... ».

« Lo so, vattene ».

Poi vide Venturino che si toglieva il cappello e lo buttava su una sedia. Essa si alzò in piedi e rimase lì; nella casa era un gran silenzio.

« Chi ti manda, che vuoi? »

« Non mi manda nessuno, sono io che ho pensato tanto di venire da voi; qualcuno dovrà pur parlarvi una volta, siete un Frateschi anche voi ».

« E con questo? Bada che non voglio seccature e non ho tempo da perdere. Io non so nulla e non sono nulla per nessuno, questo ti basti ».

« Non può bastare; credo che non ci voglia molto a capire: lo sapete come vivono i vostri genitori? »

Strana quella calma, quella rigidità, quella dolcezza del volto che sembrava estraneo a quanto diceva. Più strana ancora quella pacata decisione che costrinse Venturino a riflettere per un momento guardando attentamente la fanciulla. Una ben misera figura d'una soavità preoccupante.

« Senti, farai meglio a tornartene subito là da dove vieni. Io non c'entro in queste cose, io non sono figlio di nessuno, hai capito. È stupido tutto questo ».

« Si è figli di qualcuno in questo mondo; voi dite che è stupido,

ma io so che vostra madre e vostro padre sono vecchi, non possono più lavorare e voi avete l'obbligo di ricordarvi di loro perché siete un signore ».

Venturino avrebbe avuto di che strabiliarsi d'un tono simile, una onda di collera gli colorò il volto, fece per dire qualche cosa di violento ma poi si trattenne, prese una sedia, si avvicinò alla ragazza che rimase in piedi, con le braccia abbandonate lungo il corpo magrolino, guardando vagamente dalla parte di lui, come priva d'espressione, senza nulla alterare di quella fissità inquietante delle sue labbra leggermente segnate ai lati.

« Senti ragazza, una qualche furberia devi averla davvero; sembri un lucignolo che sta per spegnersi, eppoi parli come l'oracolo. Io non so che c'è sotto e non lo voglio nemmeno sapere. Di una cosa sola sono sicuro, che ti sei sbagliata, che non sai con chi hai a che fare; non ti devi essere immaginata nemmeno lontanamente che cosa vieni a stuzzicare quaggiù, altrimenti te ne saresti rimasta a casa tua buona buona come hai fatto fino ad oggi. Ma l'hai voluto, ora te lo dirò io: Venturino Frateschi non conosce nessuno, né padre né madre beninteso; Venturino non ha nulla a che fare con nessuno e chi lo conosce bene gira molto alla larga perché sa che lui non vuole seccature. Comunque io non ho nulla da dividere con degli straccioni e nemmeno con dei signori. Ora stai bene attenta, io non ho mai avuto paura di nessuno ed una mocciosa come te la posso far ruzzolare le scale di casa mia con un soffio. Fila, fila via perché altrimenti imparerai a conoscermi ».

Ma la piccola contadina non si mosse, non batté ciglio, non diede segno di vita e quasi sarebbe sembrato che nemmeno avesse ascoltato se non avesse prontamente risposto, appena accortasi che l'uomo aveva finito:

« Io vi conosco; ma voi non potete; per me è impossibile che un uomo sia fatto così. Voi non potete. Io ho studiato un poco dalle monache e posso capirvi, posso parlare con voi perché intendo tutto quello che dite. Io parlerò di nuovo con voi, anche tante volte, credo ».

« Pazza! a calci ti metterò subito fuori di questa casa. Che sperì, che credi? Dici che capisci e non hai capito nulla. Tremare dovresti, ma forse sei un'incosciente. Via, via! Agostino! dove sei imbecille? ».

« Io dico che è impossibile ».

« Padrone son qui ».

« Fuori, se tornerai dovrai pentirtene per sempre, te ne passerà la voglia. Fuori, buttala fuori Agostino ».

« Son qui signor Venturino ».

« Buttala fuori, via! ».

« Lasciate, ora me ne vado da me ».

Nella casa era un gran silenzio.

Vi sono dei volti che sembrano di pietra se un pensiero duro ne fissa i tratti. Venturino era rimasto quasi immobile, ed il suo volto di pietra, sembrava ancora più crudamente bello del solito.

— Oh le ore battute dalla pendola, in quella casa! Tutte le cose erano belle là e stavano al loro posto. — Da mesi sembrava che l'organo di Marianna spesso tornasse a suonare nella sua memoria. Si guardò attorno, aveva disgusto della sua abitazione, di tutto. Infine solo, ebbe qualche gesto curioso, gentile, di quei suoi gesti che sembravano denunciare in lui qualche cosa di raffinato; poi si lasciò la sopracciglia a lungo, si aggiustò la giacca addosso guardandosi allo specchio col gesto un po' vanitoso dell'uomo che cura molto se stesso, poi, tutt'un tratto mandò un sordo grido inarticolato, sputò in terra e rivoltandosi ad Agostino che entrava nella stanza portandogli le solite carte, solo guardandolo lo fece indietreggiare.

« Porta via tutto e mettimi fuori la macchina ».

« Sì ».

Sullo Stradone, mentre correva a piena velocità, arrivato ad un certo punto si voltò verso destra e guardò i campi. Ebbe il tempo di vedere tra le masse scure degli alberi la grande sagoma del fico che aveva fatto sempre ombra sulla casa dei Frateschi; si accorse che, in dieci anni, era la prima volta che, passando di là, voltava lo sguardo da quella parte. Affondò ancor più l'acceleratore corse pazzamente, in fondo alla curva scorse la lampada ancora accesa sulla porta dell'osteria di Fontananova, si fermò con grande stridore, e, prima d'entrare, stette un poco fuori ad ascoltare le voci degli avventori. Da quindici anni non era più tornato in quel locale; mentre stava per abbassare la maniglia la porta si aprì; era l'oste che aveva sentita la frenata della macchina ed era venuto a vedere, ancora lui, ma i suoi capelli ora erano quasi bianchi, ed il suo viso sembrava una parodia di quello di un tempo, v'erano dei segni attorno alla bocca come se qualcuno ve li avesse disegnati per scherzo. — Il tempo ce li ha fatti. —

« Buonasera Tempestini ».

« Buonasera signore ».

— Certo, ora sono un signore. — Venturino s'inoltrò nell'ambiente fumoso, il solito, ma i muri erano più scuri, le luci invece accecanti, costituite da due tubi fluorescenti applicati ai lati della sala che formavano due zone illuminate mettendo a nudo più d'uno straccio degli avventori.

Venturino prese posto al centro: alcuni dei presenti lo avevano riconosciuto, tanto tra i più giovani che conoscevano in lui il ricco padrone della conceria, quanto tra pochi anziani che invece rivedevano

nell'avventore il giovane Venturino, assiduo frequentatore di un tempo; ma nessuno si mosse e diede a vedere quello che pensava.

Il padrone portò la bottiglia che il signore aveva ordinato senza riconoscere l'antico cliente che era distratto e non si volse nemmeno verso di lui: si guardava attorno e si riconosceva in quel regno di scamicciati, mentre anche lui ora ravvisava due o tre persone, le stesse di un tempo, che si voltavano verso di lui, come per caso. Se avesse atteso, uno di loro tra poco si sarebbe deciso ed avrebbe certamente azzardato un mezzo sorriso di saluto; ma Venturino pensò ch'era suo dovere fare il primo segno, incoraggiare quella gente che, in fondo, lo guardava non senza una certa soggezione. Si ricordava anche come si chiamavano e disse a voce alta il nomignolo di uno: « Nini! ». Quello fece un balzo dalla sedia e si precipitò verso di lui.

« Frateschi! e chi ci avrebbe mai pensato ».

« Nini, come stai? »

« Sono sempre qua ».

Il Nini aveva una giacca un poco logora, mentre gli altri tre che stavano avvicinandosi lentamente al suo tavolo, dondolandosi sulle gambe per prendere tempo, facendo finta di camminare verso lui per dargli il tempo d'incoraggiarli con un segno, erano in maniche di camicia.

« Di che vengano a bere anche loro » fece Venturino al Nini. Erano vecchie conoscenze, gente più anziana di lui.

« Siamo rimasti quasi soltanto noi, di quel tempo ».

In principio i quattro uomini erano leggermente impacciati, davan però del tu a Venturino e bevevano rigirandosi il bicchiere tra le mani.

« Il signor Venturino! » gridò invece l'oste quando capì chi era il nuovo venuto, e gli strinse la mano scuotendogliela più volte.

« È un signore, lui » commentò vagamente il Nini come se parlasse d'altri. Gran parte degli avventori che conoscevano Venturino anche se lui non conosceva loro, erano incuriositi e stavano ascoltando senza parlare; c'era molta calma nell'osteria; l'antico vociare di un tempo, o il baccano infernale di alcune serate forse era morto come tant'altre cose eran cambiate.

« Siete un po' smorti ».

I quattro capirono subito che cosa voleva dire con ciò il loro vecchio compagno ed uno rispose: « Sì », un altro rispose « No » ed il Nini concluse: « Si e no, son passati tanti anni ». Continuarono a bere perché Venturino ordinava continuamente.

« Ho perduto un figlio in guerra » disse tutt'un tratto uno dei quattro senza che la cosa c'entrasse per nulla. Venturino per un attimo s'oscurò, guardò duramente l'uomo che aveva parlato, poi fece un gesto vago ed infine inaspettatamente si mise a gridare:

« Da bere, pane e prosciutto, bere e mangiare per tutti ». A bassa voce invece disse: « Si perdono tante cose ».

A quell'improvviso cambiamento di tono che poteva anche apparire rabbioso, i quattro uomini risero fragorosamente, il che, assieme all'offerta collettiva, richiamò gli altri avventori nei paraggi del tavolo di Venturino che, ormai, stava in silenzio ad osservare con gli occhi stranamente sbarrati.

— Ma questa, è una mascherata, il volto del Nini, di Giuseppe del Passeretti e di Gino Taddeucci sono una parodia, una mascherata che hanno fatto? che cosa è successo. No! Io, io forse sono una mascherata, anch'io? —. C'era uno specchio su cui era scritto qualche cosa a proposito della birra Peroni, sulla parete centrale dell'osteria. Venturino si alzò, tutti lo seguirono con lo sguardo. S'avvicinò allo specchio, si guardò rapidamente passandosi gli indici sulle tempie, poi si voltò verso tutti gli altri avventori ed ordinò a gran voce: « Vino vino ».

« Da bere per tutti », tradusse il Nini sempre meno discreto.

« Bere! » si udì ripetere. Venturino si mise di nuovo a sedere soddisfatto, quasi beato nel suo bel volto fosco ed intimidatorio. Un vecchio che stava in disparte si mise a cantare:

*Se tu mi vuoi baciare
baciarmi in bocca:
lo proverai più il gusto
dell'amore.*

Molti protestarono. « Dagli da bere, così si cheta ». Ma il vecchio era completamente ubriaco e continuò a canterellare in sordina con la testa appoggiata alla spalliera della sedia. Ora tutti bevevano ininterrottamente; le sedie su cui sedevano bevendo alla salute di Venturino sbattevano le gambe sul pavimento. Venturino stava in mezzo a tutti, rosso in volto ma quasi immobile in quella agitazione; s'era voltato verso l'altro lato dello stanzone dove, dietro un ripiegamento della parete, ad un tavolo di cui s'intravedeva solo un angolo, stavano quattro giovanotti indifferenti a tutto quello che accadeva attorno a loro. Giuocavano con serietà assoluta, senza parlare.

« Chi sono quelli ».

« Signori » risposero in due a Venturino.

« Chi? ».

« Uno è il Cavallotti ».

« Il figlio del Cavallotti ».

« C'è poi il figlio del dentista, il Lucchesi ».

Il Cavallotti era stato nominato per il primo perché, in tutta la provincia, il suo nome era conosciuto.

« Il figlio di quello là ».

« Di lui, sì ».

*« ... e siamo a Tutti i Santi
e il freddo viene,
a me non mi conviene
la notte a dormì sola,
se non c'è Beppin che mi consola;
tirati in là m'arruffi
mi sono pettinata... ».*

« Non si potrebbe chetare, quello? ».

« Lui non sa più cosa dice. Chetati Gasperino! bevi piuttosto ».

La stanza era piena di fumo, di odori forti, di voci, inondata di una rumorosa tristezza che, ora, Venturino riconosceva, sentendosene imprigionare come in una morsa.

« Alla salute del Frateschi! ».

« Alla vostra, alla vostra ».

Era come una morsa che stava serrandolo crudamente e lui si voltava attorno cercando qualche cosa; guardava i volti dei vecchi compagni, dell'oste, i muri, la luce fluorescente. — Una mascherata.

*« Senti lo can che abbaia
ascolta le mie paroleeeee. »*

Un grido di protesta riuscì a far chetare il vecchio che, forse, nemmeno si accorgeva di risuscitare vecchi frammenti d'una cantilena che, del resto, in quei luoghi, assieme a tante altre, persisteva anche se eran passate le guerre e le carestie.

Venturino riprese a parlare:

« Una volta, signorini di quel genere andavano al piano di sopra e si giuocavano anche la camicia ».

« Giuocare giuocano forte; ma al piano di sopra non ci va più nessuno, i tempi sono cambiati ».

« Beviamo ».

« Quello, il Cavallotti, non pensa che a giuocare e a correre in motocicletta; ma la loro villa ormai è in vendita, ci son delle ipoteche sopra. Chi l'avrebbe detto, una famiglia come quella ».

« Ma chi la comprerà, oggi, una villa così? ».

« La compra chi può » disse Venturino.

« Chi può » fece eco uno dei quattro anziani.

« Mangiate e bevete ancora, se volete, perché tra poco si va a letto », concluse Venturino, poi non parlò più. Tutti erano pieni di vino; il vecchio ubriaco ogni tanto alzava la voce ma non diceva più nulla di comprensibile.

Andandosene Venturino rimase un poco fuori della porta ad ascoltare, sentì che parlavano di lui, ma non volle sapere che cosa diceva, si allontanò, partì guidando con calma, stava bene benché avesse un po' caldo alla testa. La campagna era oscura, affogata nel silenzio e quasi non si accorse d'esser giunto in città, si trovò inaspettatamente in mezzo alla grande piazza deserta; l'attraversò pigiando sull'acceleratore per violare quel silenzio, arrivò a casa leggermente offuscato da un certo disgusto che corrispondeva al ribollire di tutto il vino bevuto che fermentava nel suo stomaco.

IV

Nella vecchia casa dei Frateschi era buio, tutti dormivano; ma nella sua stanza, Natalina, guardando la notte attraverso la finestra stava inginocchiata ai piedi del letto abitualmente rivolta ad una immagine di ginetta che, attaccata al muro, nemmeno poteva vedere, ma con lo sguardo vagante per il cielo visibile dal riquadro della finestra dove non si scorgeva altro che stelle. Quante notti stava così senza sapere bene il perché, senza nulla chiedere nemmeno a se stessa.

I vecchi e sua madre avevano atteso il suo ritorno seduti in cucina al buio, in silenzio: « Che hai fatto » avevano domandato appena li sentirono avvicinarsi sull'impiantito dell'aia, senza aspettare che avesse oltrepassato la soglia di casa.

« Ho fatto, ho fatto ».

« Ma che ti prende? ».

« Vedete » disse poi il vecchio rivolto alla moglie ed alla nuora: « Queste son cose che non dovrebbero accadere. C'era da intenderlo che succedeva una cosa così. Ma ora anche questo deve finire. Là non si deve andare; che vogliamo noi? non siamo mica tutti ammattiti. Io morirò presto ».

Nel buio le due donne scuotevano la testa assentendo, ma forse nemmeno avevano capito bene che cosa avesse proprio voluto dire il vecchio con quelle frasi dette a fatica. Tacquero tutti un bel po', poi Casimiro, a voce più alta, riprese, quasi cercando di far risorgere qualche cosa dell'antica autorità:

« Ai campi si ha da guardare ».

« Ai campi, ormai, io non so che fare; non m'avete fatto tutta contadina ».

Ci fu un'altra lunga pausa, poi la madre di Natalina disse, quasi balbettando:

« Ma un marito, tu, un uomo giovane che sappia lavorarli... »

Nel buio si sentì allora un lieve grido della ragazza, un suono stridente ed inarticolato, quasi fosse stata ferita. Tutti tacquero; si udì infine il nonno che si alzava e saliva sopra seguito dopo poco dalle donne. La madre di Natalina, prima di lasciare la cucina disse, quasi sotto voce:

« Nata', ma che vuoi fare. Sulla tavola ci sono i tuoi fagioli, mangia ».

Natalina si accorse di aver molta fame, e al buio, trovando a tastoni la scodella ed estraendo una posata dal cassetto, si mise a mangiare con un certo gusto. Dopo, salita nella sua stanza si era inginocchiata; quella sera però era rimasta così, quanto tempo non l'avrebbe saputo dire; guardava il cielo che, quando si fissa a lungo, tutt'un tratto appare come un vuoto che assorbe, che non permette più di pensare ma fa battere il cuore; che farebbe piangere se Natalina conoscesse il sapore del pianto; ma il suo volto è invece fermato in un marmo trasparente e duro.

Natalina non aveva programmi, non sapeva che cosa avrebbe fatto; non ragionava sulla sorda miseria della sua vita assieme ai vecchi; sapeva che doveva seguire l'impulso di quanto pian piano l'aveva condotta ad affrontare quel suo zio, ma non avrebbe saputo definire neanche a se stessa la ragione precisa, non era la miseria o la speranza di qualche soluzione che la alleviasse e a sollecitarla; il bisogno di affrontare quell'uomo era nato spontaneo mentre per tanti anni aveva inorridito, quando i discorsi degli altri le insegnavano a conoscerlo e a capire il mostruoso egoismo del suo disinteresse, la fredda cattiveria di alcune delle sue azioni. Quando aveva detto a Venturino: « Io capisco quello che dite » forse non si era resa conto di che cosa volesse intendere con ciò; ma sentiva che realmente capiva, che dentro di sé organizzava il senso ed il significato delle parole e dei sentimenti di quell'uomo e del loro incontro. Così era certa che sarebbe tornata da lui.

Nel riquadro della finestra lo spazio pieno di stelle la assorbiva, succhiava tutto il suo essere muto. « Un marito! » c'era il suono di questa parola che ogni tanto folgorava la sua mente come porre un oggetto pesante tra lei e quel vuoto infinito che la rapiva; le parole di sua madre passavano nelle sue viscere come un brivido di febbre maligna, ma lo spazio se la ribeveva immediatamente, si beveva la sua anima quasi a immolarla ad un estremo sacrificio senza senso.

Se n'era parlato molto dell'acquisto di Venturino. Aveva fatto impressione e, benché tutti lo ritenessero un uomo ricco, una villa di quel genere era stata sempre considerata dominio d'un altro genere di gente ricca, perché non facesse impressione il fatto che lui ne fosse divenuto il proprietario.

« E pensare che, da ragazzo, aveva i calzoni pieni di toppe ».

Venturino, attraverso il buco nel giornale pareva quasi che potesse ascoltare tutti i commenti; ma invece benché non gli sfuggisse che qualche volta, sui marciapiedi della piazza i commercianti questionavano di lui voltando ogni tanto gli occhi verso il punto in cui se ne stava seduto col giornale spiegato davanti, non immaginava troppo bene il genere di commenti e nemmeno gli interessava troppo capire.

Quando Francesco era tornato dopo aver parlato col vecchio Cavallotti, lui non aveva voluto perdere tempo. S'era recato subito alla villa ed aveva voluto veder tutto personalmente. Fin da bambino conosceva la bella grande casa sulla collina, ma non vi si era mai avvicinato oltre la distanza assai rilevante che la separava dal cancello d'ingresso del giardino. La villa dominava tutta Pescia e molta della campagna circostante; aveva un bel viale di cipressi, era costruita a tre piani e si diceva che dentro fosse piena di cose antiche. In verità nella sua prima visita aveva finito per vedere molto poco; era arrivato armato di curiosità e soprattutto, come faceva per ogni suo affare importante, dell'intenzione di valutare di persona, fidandosi di quella specie d'intuito che lo soccorreva dove non avrebbe saputo rendersi conto per propria esperienza. I terreni li conosceva palmo a palmo, conosceva tutte le case coloniche che facevano parte del podere, gli erano familiari fin dalla nascita; la casa invece esorbitava un poco dalle sue competenze, ma con quella specie di potere raddomantico ch'egli si attribuiva con segreto orgoglio, si era preparato a tutto valutare. Aveva appena attraversata la soglia assieme a Francesco, aveva appena salutato il vecchio Cavallotti che gli era venuto incontro cortesemente, ma con lo sguardo rivolto altrove ed un fare leggermente annoiato senza però mancare di discrezione, quando alla sua destra, dalla stanza vicina sentì battere le ore: quattro rintocchi sonori, profondi, due un poco più argentini ma ugualmente capaci di riempire la casa della loro voce. Il vecchio Cavallotti nemmeno aveva udito, Francesco non sembrò essere attratto da quella voce dolcemente metallica, pensava ad altro, era un poco sbalordito che Venturino potesse comprarsi una casa come quella: — Allora è più ricco di quanto si potesse credere. — Venturino invece si era impuntato come un cane da caccia che ha fiutato la selvaggina, le parole gli eran rimaste in sospeso sulle labbra e soltanto quando l'orologio finì di suonare, si

voltò dalla parte da cui erano giunti i rintocchi e là, in fondo, attraverso una porta bianca, vide la grande pendola.

Intanto però Venturino non aveva perduta una parola di quanto gli stava dicendo il Cavallotti, sui pregi delle terre e della casa, sulle ragioni che l'inducevano a vendere che erano tutte d'ordine moralistico di fronte ai nuovi tempi: « La vita è cambiata, certi lussi non hanno più ragione di essere. Ci ritiriamo a Firenze. Una villa così, solo per venircene in campagna quando ne abbiamo voglia è un lusso ingiusto ai tempi d'oggi. Lei ne fa la sua abitazione; una buona abitazione per chi ha molto lavorato e guadagnato ». Passavano da una stanza all'altra, Venturino si guardava attorno, ma i rintocchi uditi sulla soglia della villa pareva l'avessero racchiuso in un alone di gelosa ed impenetrabile dolcezza.

Quando furono seduti in un salottino molto ben arredato di cose vecchie, i rintocchi della pendola tornarono a visitarlo, questa volta più da lontano, e lui, che fino a quel momento aveva detto solo qualche frase necessaria e un poco svagata, tutt'un tratto disse quasi intempestivamente: « Ci accomoderemo, sarò ben felice di avere una casa come questa ».

« C'è della gente alla quale Dio, o il diavolo, non si sa, ma qualcuno di lassù gli vuol bene, gli semina la strada di tutto e partono straccioni per arrivare padroni ». Questo l'aveva detto il droghiere al cassiere della Banca di Credito continuando con lui il discorso che aveva incominciato, a proposito di Venturino, col cliente che l'aveva preceduto.

VI

Natalina era uscita di casa verso sera e, questa volta, non aveva detto nulla a nessuno. S'era messa a camminare svelta sullo Stradone. In Piazza Grande, dall'angolo, aveva dato un'occhiata al caffè, aveva visto Venturino che leggeva il giornale con Francesco seduto vicino e, scantonando s'era subito diretta verso Borgo della Vittoria, era salita nella casa e ad Agostino che aveva aperto: « Aspetto di là, ho da parlare al padrone ». Agostino l'aveva guardata spaventato mentre lei si dirigeva nell'altra stanza per istallarsi esattamente sulla sedia della prima volta. « Vuol proprio aspettarlo? » aveva poi domandato vagamente. « Sì, l'aspetto ». Ed era rimasta seduta immobile e rigida che pareva dovesse stancarsi a stare così. Ci rimase per un'ora intera.

Francesco, quel giorno, era stato aggredito da una idea; aveva bisogno di un microscopio: -- Vi sono tante cose che non si vedono senza microscopio anche se le particelle di dimensioni colloidali non sono visibili nemmeno con quello. — Non era povero, passava per

una delle persone agiate della città, ma la spesa lo spaventava soprattutto in rapporto ai commenti di sua moglie e della figlia. « Mia figlia ora dice che è una donna, sarà qualche nuova pretesa, vorrà sposarsi! altro che sposarsi! un microscopio è necessario ».

Questo stralcio dei suoi pensieri era andato a comunicarlo a Venturino il quale però sembrava che non l'ascoltasse perché, col giornale spiegato davanti, non dava segno di vita: in quel momento stava arrivando la corriera da Firenze e lui osservava chi scendeva ed anche cercava di scorgere chi dentro l'autobus rimaneva al suo posto per proseguire. Infine però rispose:

« Ma a che aspiri tu, di che ti vuoi lamentare. Io sono la mia famiglia, ma tu che ce n'hai una di che cosa vuoi lamentarti. Io penso a me, tu pensa anche a loro perché così devi ».

« Ma io ora, per esempio, ho bisogno d'un microscopio e non è mica facile trovarlo, comprarlo e portarlo a casa ».

« Un microscopio? Anche i microbi ora? ».

« I microbi possono anche non entrarci, ma io ora del microscopio ne ho bisogno ed è inutile che lo spieghi a te il perché ».

« Non me lo spiegare, non ci tengo, ma tu finirai al manicomio ».

« Non dovrei mai parlare con te; solo quando ti faccio comodo mi vieni a cercare ».

« E tu, se ti fa comodo, comprati anche il microscopio ».

« A dirsi è facile ».

« Ma lasciami in pace, se ci son delle cose stupide tu le vai a cercare ».

« E tu vai a cercare le villanie perché ti credi che basti una villa da signori per essere un uomo come si deve ».

« A proposito, che te ne pare? Ormai l'ho comprata e voglio vedere che se ne può fare di una vita. Sono ancora giovane sai ».

« Giovane giovane sarà un po' troppo, ma insomma la nostra è sempre una buona età ».

« Per far che cosa? »

« Se non lo sai te. Ognuno sa di sé, io me ne servo per avere un microscopio e capire tante cose, ed ora vado a cena ». Se ne andò senza salutare alzandosi senza preavviso come fossero in urto, ma era invece così ogni volta.

Anche Venturino, dopo poco si avviò verso casa, apparentemente del solito umore, ma in realtà, da quando aveva deciso di comprare la villa dei Cavallotti, in fondo ai suoi pensieri qualche cosa si era intorbidato, c'era una agitazione sotterranea che sembrava intralciargli certa libertà di pensare.

Solo dal gesto con cui Agostino gli aprì la porta ebbe la sensazione che c'era qualche cosa di nuovo; ma non dové rifletterci nemmeno

per un attimo perché dalla soglia, nell'altra stanza, vide il profilo affilato delle gambe della ragazza che stava seduta contro la parete.

VII

C'è a volte più significato in un particolare intravisto per caso, che nell'intera presenza di una persona o nella lunga convivenza con essa; sembra che uno sguardo fulmineo, a volte, magari da un particolare insignificante possa rubare quello che sta più nascosto nel segreto di una creatura umana. In questi casi qualche cosa s'incarna in una immagine apparentemente insignificante fino a concederle certi poteri di turbamento e di rappresentazione raramente decifrabili. L'illuminazione sul vero significato d'un essere che attraversa in qualche modo la nostra vita suscita un ignaro spirito di possesso, una necessità di dominio risolvendoli in una emozione capace di penetrare nelle pieghe più segrete della nostra anima.

Nell'attimo stesso in cui Venturino vide le immobili ed un po' troppo scoperte gambe della fanciulla, non solo apprese da quell'aspetto minuto, da quel ghiaccio color chiaro della pelle di bionda, che lei era là ad aspettarlo, che nella sua personcina c'era qualche cosa di triste, c'era una consunzione di miseria ed una gentilezza conturbante; ma pure scorse in quella immagine che suscitava il pensiero d'una donna immatura, in ritardo, qualcosa che lo attanagliava entro certe sensazioni penetranti, ed inspiegabili. La mortificazione di miserevole gentilezza così palese nelle aguzze patite ginocchia, lo aveva colpito di sorpresa, sembrava l'avesse quasi ferito internamente. Nello stesso momento, oltre al fascino commovente di quell'immagine che aveva potere di sconvolgerlo, Venturino si accorse pure che alcune emozioni ch'egli aveva rifiutato dalla vita nei momenti più drammatici, nei contrasti più duri, potevano venirgli inaspettate ed improvvise da una cosa così la quale, in fondo, pareva non aver nemmeno senso.

Si armò subito contro se stesso prima ancora di prevenirsi contro la ragazza, e il risentimento acre a cui fu costretto alterò i tratti della sua faccia, e sembrò affondare l'occhio in una lontananza preoccupante. Fu con quel volto e con lo sguardo inconsapevolmente ancora fisso sulle gambette pallide che s'inoltrò nell'altra stanza per volgere finalmente gli occhi in volto a Natalina. Essa si alzò in piedi lentamente, con una calma naturale, adeguatissima alla sua bellezza acerba e mortificata, lisa, adattatissima alla miseria della veste, che nel suo squallore pareva divenisse perfino stranamente solenne. Natalina non salutò e Venturino non pensò nemmeno ad accennare un saluto, però non trovava cosa dire, fu tentato di prenderla di peso

senza parlare e di metterla fuori della porta, ma non lo fece. Il primo impeto d'ira invece di sbollire s'immagazzinò nel suo petto, pronto a scatenarsi con la violenza che ogni particolare del suo volto facevan prevedere.

« Vogliamo parlare? » chiese infine la fanciulla con la sua voce leggermente stridente.

« Di che » chiese l'uomo quasi a denti stretti.

« Lo sapete, dobbiamo parlare perché voi vi rammentiate di vostra madre e di vostro padre ». L'immobilità della ragazza, mentre parlava con le braccia abbandonate lungo i fianchi quasi come se stesse sull'attenti, la vaga fissità del suo sguardo inalterabile come ogni altro tratto del suo volto, se non potevano senz'altro mettere a disagio un uomo come Venturino, specialmente in un momento di particolare tensione, si facevano comunque sentire profondamente, anche lì non erano senza potere. Pure questa volta finì per mettersi a sedere con un gesto falsamente rassegnato a subire; poi stette un poco in attesa, prima di rispondere come se fosse calmissimo:

« Che hai in testa; figlia mia non ti rendi conto che potrebbe finire male? »

« Che volete che ci sia di peggio ». Venturino non cercò nemmeno d'indagare il senso di questa risposta e disse impetuosamente:

« Insomma che vuoi? ».

« Io vengo qui per dirvi queste cose ».

« Credi che a me interessino? »

« Dovrebbero interessarvi ».

« Speri che m'intenerisca. Io non ho nulla a che fare con le tue fantasie, con te e con nessuno. Se te ne vai fai una cosa buona, io te lo consiglio ».

« Voi potete anche arrabbiarvi di più, ma non è possibile che un uomo sia veramente fatto così ».

« Come mi vedi fatto, stupida! tutti gli uomini sono come me, tutti peggio di me ».

« Ma non siete mica solo al mondo; eppoi, i vostri genitori sono pure padre e madre ».

« Io » Venturino cominciò a parlare ad alta voce « sono solo, che cosa sai tu, idiota. Non mi diverte nemmeno pensarle certe cose ». A questo punto tacque un poco, poi riprese, come avesse capito qualche cosa di nuovo: « Ah capisco! anche tu hai saputo che compro la villa. Che cosa speri? A me non interessa nemmeno quello che pensate, ma ci deve esser pur qualche cosa che ti porta qui ad attaccarti come una mignatta. Guarda, se io perdo la pazienza finirà che ti prendo per il collo e ti scaravento giù dalle scale ».

« Non è possibile ».

« Te lo farò vedere io se non è possibile, anzi è una cosa che mi piace ».

« Non dicevo delle scale ».

Venturino alzò le braccia, fu come l'inizio d'un gesto feroce, ma si trattenne, tacque col volto infuocato e la ragazza continuò:

« Parlate, io posso intendere quello che dite, andai a scuola, quando in casa si poteva ».

« Qualche cosa ci devi avere in quella testa. Senti; se davvero intendi bene quello che ti dico, stai bene attenta, te lo dirò una volta, così capirai e mi lascerai in pace perché questa storia comincia a diventare troppo lunga. Tu sei una stracciona che sta facendo dei calcoli sbagliati, forse sei una stupida che non si rende conto di quello che fa, magari una furba serpe velenosa; ma a me che vuoi che faccia tutto questo! Se poi hai l'anima della mendicante, forse è così, prendi queste mille lire e vattene per sempre, non sopporterò più che tu ritorni, più più, hai capito? » Venturino si tolse mille lire di tasca e le porse alla ragazza che non si mosse, allora le posò sull'orlo del tavolo. « E ora ascolta bene, giacché hai detto che puoi capire: siamo razze diverse, non c'è nulla in comune tra voi e me; ma io ho paura che tu non possa capire nulla di quello che ti dico. Se non m'intendi, allora impara stasera che gli uomini come me non debbono nulla a nessuno. Dunque attenta a non tornarmi tra i piedi perché io le schiaccio le persone che mi disturbano, non si porta il male in casa mia. Te ne devi andare e basta; via, ora! »

« Io furba non sono, ma vi dico che ci sono delle cose da pensare e anche voi le dovete pensare. Furbizia non ne ho ».

« Non si capisce nemmeno quello che vuoi dire ».

« Questo non è vero, voi capite tutto bene, sicuramente molto bene ».

Venturino si passò una mano sul volto facendola scorrere lentamente verso il mento mentre, fissando gli occhi sulla ragazza, si meravigliava di sentirsi stanco. Natalina non batté ciglio, ed il suo sguardo, benché sostenesse con molta semplicità quello dell'uomo, sembrava opporre la dura barriera del suo smalto alla penetrazione così abituale in Venturino nei riguardi di chi gli stava di fronte.

« Al diavolo! » disse l'uomo a bassa voce, poi tutt'un tratto esasperato: « Vattene! ».

« Ora me ne vado, forse è meglio, ma tornerò ».

« Non tornerai perché ti dovrò schiacciare, così ». Venturino fece l'atto di mettere le mani addosso a Natalina, ma essa si ritrasse con un movimento elegante e rapido mentre, allungando una mano, s'impadronì delle mille lire lasciate sul tavolo e se le infilò in seno. Venturino fissò un istante la ragazza come smarrito, poi rise forte, con disprezzo che pareva estremamente spontaneo.

« Ora ti capisco meglio. Vattene, sei stupida e cialtrona ».

« Tornerò ».

« Ma che vuoi. No che non tornerai, te lo assicuro io, non tornerai ».

« Tornerò perché dobbiamo ancora parlare ».

« Ma è una mania la tua ».

« No perché quello che dico va detto e voi lo potete intendere bene ».

« Canaglia, ecco che cosa ci vuole » ed imprevedutamente, con un balzo giovanile e feroce le fu addosso, fece per batterla ma si trattenne, la prese per un braccio e trascinandola in anticamera come una cosa la buttò fuori dalla porta.

Agostino, nel suo stanzino stava affacciato sul cortile ed, in quel momento, la signora del piano di sopra aveva domandato, dalla finestra: « Agostino, che cosa succede? ». Il ragazzo rispose rapidamente: « Nulla » e chiuse la finestra.

« Agostino! » chiamò Venturino. Il ragazzo corse. « Dite padrone ».

« Con chi parlavi? ».

« Chiudevo la finestra ». Venturino gli fu addosso e lo colpì sulla testa coi due pugni uniti. « Che cosa c'entro io, padrone ». « Via la cena ». Ed il ragazzo fuggì dalla stanza. Venturino lo richiamò: « Come si chiama quella ragazza ». « Natalina, si chiama ». « Vattene ».

Natalina era caduta in ginocchio al buio, sull'orlo delle scale. Si rialzò lentamente e, orientandosi a tastoni, cominciò a scendere; sul braccio le eran venuti due grossi lividi neri, si era sbucciata un ginocchio, ma di tutto questo sembrava non accorgersi. Uscì calma dal portone, ma appena fu nella strada un'ombra le si precipitò contro come volesse aggredirla; ma le mani tremanti del nonno ricaddero subito penzolanti nel vuoto dalle sue spalle protese. Piegato in due com'era volse la testa verso la nipote e con gli occhi lucidi di pianto domandò:

« Che hai fatto disgraziata ».

« Quello che devo fare. Perché sei venuto fino qua ».

« Sei pazza, sei pazza » disse il vecchio mentre il suo povero corpo scuoteva tutto. « Io morirò presto ».

« Nonno, di questo non si muore, si muore di tutte le altre cose ».

Poi camminarono al buio, in silenzio. Quando furono sullo Stradone il vecchio disse ancora:

« Bimba, bisogna accettare; si nasce magari con la disgrazia e la disgrazia bisogna accettare. Che cosa vuoi fare tu, invece ».

« Qualche cosa nonno, voglio fare ».

« Ma che cosa hai in testa ».

« Di fare quello che è giusto ».

« Non c'è più nulla di giusto, Dio ci perdoni ».

« C'è, c'è, nonno. Eppoi che importa, perché ve la prendete tanto? ».

« Perché se tu potessi capire sapresti che quello che fai non va fatto; quello là non ha nulla a che fare con noi, proprio nulla ».

« È proprio quello che dice anche lui, invece abbiamo tutti a che fare ».

« Ha lo stesso nome nostro ».

« Il nome non conta. Voi nonno m'avete fatta studiare e io capisco, credo di sapere delle cose. Lasciatemi fare ».

« No, bimba, no ».

« Perché ».

« Perché, perché... » ma le parole gli morirono in gola e continuarono il resto della strada in silenzio. La campagna era piena di vita, di vibrazione fredda e sotterranea, dai campi al bosco voci notturne, stridor di qualche grillo solitario sotto il cielo stellato. Quando entrarono in cucina il vecchio disse come a conclusione d'un suo ragionamento:

« È nato un bubbone sul ceppo dei Frateschi; io morirò presto ».

I

Ed ora che Marianna aveva finito di dettare alcune lettere alla ragazza che le faceva da segretaria, da direttrice del negozio e che si occupava anche del laboratorio di maglieria, poteva finalmente mettersi a pensare con calma alla lettera che aveva ricevuto quella mattina. Da tanti anni anche i rari rapporti epistolari con Venturino si erano esauriti senza che nessuno dei due ne avesse sofferto.

Marianna era una donna che sapeva unire una tenerezza spontanea e impegnativa, un certo trasporto sentimentale, ad una valutazione ragionevole delle cose. Essa pensava di conoscere la vita come generalmente lo pensano tutte le brave persone che, avendo avuta qualche esperienza libera, avendo seguito un comportamento spontaneo e disinteressato di fronte a molte delle cose che chiudono i più, specialmente chi fa parte di un mondo piccolo borghese, nella mortificante semioscurità della menzogna, del timore, della piccola soggezione sociale, si sentiva perciò forte come una donna che avesse toccato il fondo di quanto più vale nell'esistenza. Marianna pensava che come lei nessuno conosceva l'uomo ch'essa aveva amato, protetto, educato con una dedizione che oscillava tra la passione dell'amante e l'affetto materno ed il rapporto del socio di affari. Erano stati belli quegli anni per lei, anche perché si era difesa di fronte al suo ambiente abituale con una franchezza semplice e certamente coraggiosa che, se molti ammiravano, molti altri non le perdonavano.

Marianna proveniva da una famiglia di buone tradizioni borghesi, di commercianti torinesi: la sua prima giovinezza era stata ricca, la sua educazione particolarmente curata. Giovanissima aveva presto viaggiato assieme al padre rimasto vedovo; la mancanza della madre e la lunga convivenza col padre molto avevano contribuito a darle quel tratto di donna spigliatamente energica, quasi con qualche sfumatura maschile subito corretta da una qualche grazia ed una eleganza del tutto di donna. Più tardi, rimasta sola ed erede di una fortuna quasi dissestata, non si trovò affatto impacciata a mettersi su un negozio, dirigerlo, vivere di quella risorsa, partecipare attivamente al commercio

senza che ne soffrisse certo suo gusto alla esistenza libera, confortata dai piccoli agi tipici della vita domestica della borghesia torinese.

Marianna era convinta di aver conosciuto a fondo Venturino durante gli anni di vita in comune, ed anche se ora da tanto non si erano scritti, essa non aveva mai cessato di pensare a lui ed a quel tempo, serenamente compiaciuta e sicura che, anche se non si fossero più scritti né visti, tra lei e Venturino non vi erano né equivoci né risentimenti di sorta. Venturino s'era affidato a lei come l'allievo che confida ciecamente nel maestro perché se l'è scelto a propria misura; essa aveva trovato ad un tempo un carattere docile come la cera, cioè un uomo abbandonato che si lasciava formare da chi aveva tutto da dargli e niente da chiedergli; insieme aveva avuto un uomo apprezzabile. A Marianna non era certo sfuggito che Venturino aveva anche dei tratti di sottile calcolatore, ma non solo non le era dispiaciuto, anzi, su quella natura di calcolatore aveva basato alcuni elementi del suo affetto e tutti i suoi rapporti di collaborazione nel lavoro, trovandovi qualche cosa su cui si fondava la costanza e la serenità della loro unione. Quel ragazzone così solido, così pieno di energie vitali, così dolce e remissivo nell'amore, non si concedeva interamente, questo era evidente, c'era qualche cosa che rimaneva chiuso in lui e inaccessibile, un distacco che se pur non guastava la forza dell'unione, nemmeno conosceva abbandoni né conosceva quella necessità di reciproco cercarsi. Tutto questo Marianna, da donna d'intuito abbastanza fine l'aveva ben compreso, ma non aveva trovato nulla di spiacevole in ciò; in un certo modo essa pensava di somigliargli, in quanto, anche lei, in un angolo del proprio cuore era rimasta libera, disponibile, aveva lasciato intatta una zona di riserva sempre pronta ed efficace quando le cose, come poi avvenne con tanta naturalezza, avessero cambiato direzione, tra lei e Venturino.

Era dai primi tempi della guerra che lei non sapeva più nulla dell'uomo che era andato a sprofondarsi a Pescia. Qualche notizia indiretta le era giunta, sapeva che era ricco assai di più di quando si allontanò da lei. Si erano divisi da buoni amici quando Venturino, durante uno dei suoi ritorni a Pescia dove qualche cosa continuava a legarlo, se vi sostava ogni volta che i suoi viaggi di affari glielo favorivano, all'insaputa di Marianna divenne il padrone della conceria attraverso una serie di manovre che tenne segretissime e che, in parole povere, furono un solenne imbroglio ai danni d'un vecchio industriale che i primi anni di guerra invece di arricchire avevano indebitato.

Si spostò a Pescia sempre più di frequente, sempre più a lungo, finché le nuove situazioni create dalla guerra non lo costrinsero a rimanere nel paese come costringevano Marianna a non muoversi da Torino e dal proprio lavoro. In quel periodo la mancanza di scrupoli

di Venturino non conobbe limiti, la sua attività fu vertiginosa, certa signorilità di modi acquistata dalla lezione di Marianna gli fu enormemente utile per dare un tono a mille affari più o meno puliti e più o meno scrupolosi. In seguito, tutt'un tratto, appena finita la guerra, lo si era visto impigrire, consumare gran parte delle giornate in piccole passeggiate ed a leggere il giornale, seduto al caffè, sul marciapiede d'estate e dietro i vetri del locale d'inverno.

II

Di questa seconda parte della vita di Venturino Marianna conosceva ben poco, come del resto della sua giovinezza fino al giorno in cui si erano incontrati essa conosceva solo quanto il giovanotto le aveva raccontato, non tanto nascondendo alcune verità, quanto modificandone l'aspetto ed il senso; ma ora Venturino si era fatto vivo di nuovo improvvisamente con quella lunga lettera ch'essa aveva letto in fretta avanti, non certo emozionata, ma contenta come se quella fosse la comune lettera di una normale corrispondenza mai interrotta alla quale si tiene molto. Prima di tutto Marianna aveva rimarcato che la lettera era ben scritta: — Sa esprimersi assai bene, è molto merito mio. — Poi, dalla descrizione della villa che aveva acquistato ebbe l'impressione che Venturino doveva essersi ancora arricchito da quando non si vedevano più. Lui le diceva che avrebbe avuto bisogno d'un certo aiuto che solo lei poteva darle, che era felice di quell'occasione che gli dava la spinta per farsi nuovamente vivo; diceva addirittura che l'occasione poteva anche essere voluta per riallacciare amichevoli rapporti con la persona a cui tanto doveva, che sempre aveva ricordato anche durante il suo lungo silenzio. L'unica persona per la quale sentiva affetto e riconoscenza; proprio così finiva la lettera.

Marianna era incerta se accettare l'invito. Non temeva e nemmeno desiderava un ritorno dei vecchi legami; si riteneva donna di grande equilibrio e perfettamente serena. Comunque la lettera e la richiesta le avevano fatto piacere e, se avvertiva qualche esitazione, era soltanto dovuta a quel timore che una donna prova a rifarsi vedere dopo tanti anni, specialmente quando essa ha sorpassata quell'età in cui si può realmente nascondere il corso del tempo. — Io l'ho amato molto, certe volte. — Non vi era ragione di rifiutare; del resto essa non aveva mai rinunciato a nulla di ciò che le faceva piacere nella vita, fidandosi giustamente di quella moderazione di sentimenti che sempre l'aveva tolta felicemente d'impaccio in tante occasioni.

Mentre faceva queste considerazioni la pendola sulla scala suonò le nove e mezza: era ormai notte.

III

Nella villa sul colle, sperduta in una tenera notte, in quel preciso momento la pendola suonò le nove e mezzo, nove rintocchi seguiti da altri due diversi: Venturino alzò gli occhi dalle carte che stava leggendo, era il primo giorno in cui prendeva possesso della nuova casa, abbandonando definitivamente quella oscura e indisponente di Borgo della Vittoria.

S'era aggirato tutto il giorno per le stanze calcolando tutti i lavori di restauro che erano necessari, tutti gli spostamenti che gli parevano opportuni; aveva inveito contro le due donne e contro Agostino che non si affrettavano a pulire e sistemare alcune cose, ed aveva finito per sentirsi un poco sperduto, gli pareva di essere ospite, provvisoriamente obbligato a passare la notte in casa d'altri. — Ma saprò ben come mettere ordine qui e fare in modo che tutto divenga veramente mio, evidentemente non basta pagarle, le cose, perché siano proprio nostre. Lo saprò bene. — Articolava questo pensiero con violenza come se si trovasse apertamente in polemica con qualcuno. Pensava però a Marianna, alla possibilità ch'essa accettasse di venire un poco in quella campagna per aiutarlo a far di quella villa la sua casa.

Più tardi si mise a sedere su una poltrona, chiuse gli occhi, e rimase a lungo in quella posizione, poi uscì in giardino. Si fermò ad osservare le sagome dei grandi alberi e, laggiù, le luci di Pescia. Avanzò nel giardino e guardò nella notte l'elegante struttura settecentesca della sua nuova abitazione che si ritagliava intera, contro il cielo, contro un azzurro smalto luminoso incorniciato da grandi alberi. Rimase a lungo anche in quella posizione poi rientrò in casa ma rimase seduto al buio ad attendere, sapeva lui che cosa; e, quando la pendola riempì le stanze dei suoi rintocchi si alzò ed accese la luce, sentì che la casa era abitata, che finalmente andava sciogliendosi certa angoscia impreveduta la cui era stato vittima. Comunque non era così che aveva immaginato la sua prima giornata nella nuova abitazione.

Al mattino dovè recarsi allo stabilimento per incontrarsi con alcuni uomini d'affari, doveva controllare l'arrivo di un vagone di pelli fresche, ed infine, con Agostino, salire al quinto ripiano dell'essiccatoio dove, lassù vicino al soffitto, in un nascondiglio che soltanto lui ed Agostino conoscevano, teneva i libri della contabilità più cospicua dei suoi affari, quella vera che doveva stare gelosamente nascosta agli agenti della finanza. In questa occasione il ragazzo seguiva sempre il padrone a breve distanza.

Il pomeriggio invece, dopo colazione, si mise in giardino ad attendere e, più tardi, arrivò Francesco. Lo vide salire dalla strada in fondo al cancello e gli andò incontro. Francesco gli disse quasi come un saluto: « Hai fatto presto a impossessarti di questo paradiso ».

« È un paradiso? ».

« Che cosa vuoi che possa desiderare di più di così un uomo. Sei un fortunato e tu forse non te ne rendi nemmeno conto ».

« Chi sa che cosa è la fortuna ».

Francesco s'era fermato perché la salita lo affaticava, si sentiva stanco quel giorno; s'era poi fermato perché improvvisamente gli era venuto in mente qualche cosa:

« Sai che forse io ho trovato il microscopio, un po' vecchio, d'occasione, ma forse l'ho trovato, mi daranno una risposta stasera ».

« Ci tieni molto? ».

« Capirai! Ormai come posso farne a meno, senza un microscopio non saprei più come vivere, perché non potrei andare avanti in quello che desidero sapere e vedere di persona ». Francesco si era talmente illuminato in volto che Venturino lo guardava serio e quasi affascinato. Francesco si sentì felice, era la prima volta che l'amico non sottolineava ironicamente una cosa del genere, anzi aveva l'impressione che condividesse con lui l'idea che il microscopio era una cosa importante della quale non si può fare a meno.

« Il microscopio ti fa felice, no? ».

« Più che felice mi dà quello che mi manca, riempie il vuoto delle mie conoscenze, molte sono le cose che ho da sperimentare perché, mentre le particelle colloidali sono di dimensioni inarrivabili, vi son altri elementi... ».

« Ma lascia correre » disse bruscamente Venturino costringendolo a cambiare d'un tratto espressione, per la fatica d'interrompere quel discorso dal quale già si era lasciato trasportare con una foga quasi voluttuosa. « Vedi, tu sei un uomo fortunato, hai detto di me, ma tu sei un uomo fortunato ».

« Questo che me lo dica tu che hai tutto, che sei completamente indipendente, che se tu desiderassi un microscopio lo avresti subito, il migliore, senza pensarci e senza dover considerare un sacrificio venirne in possesso, diventa proprio buffo ».

« Purtroppo il guaio è che io non desidero un microscopio ».

« Non si può avere sempre i medesimi interessi degli altri, ma tu hai desiderato una villa e l'hai avuta ».

« Va bene, va bene, Francesco. Andiamo dentro a bere qualche cosa. In questa casa io vorrei fare alcuni cambiamenti, è grande e bisogna organizzarla in modo che proceda bene. Poi bisogna abituarsi ad una casa nuova di questo genere che è bella, vero? ».

« Più che bella ».

Passarono assieme il pomeriggio e non andarono al caffè, Venturino parlò molto più del consueto e, Francesco, che forse per la prima volta aveva passato una giornata serena col suo amico si meravigliò, nel suo ritorno, trovandosi disposto a pensare che Venturino sembra-

va un poco infrollito; ma si corresse subito: — Forse, la casa nuova gli fa bene. — Avvicinandosi alla città smise di pensare al nuovo padrone della villa dei Cavallotti, gli era tutt'un tratto venuto in mente che a casa avrebbe trovata la risposta per il suo microscopio; gliela doveva portare un tale da Firenze, ed allora accelerò il passo, ma dovè poi fermarsi e rallentare perché si sentiva stanco. Non stava molto bene di salute in quei giorni. Arteriosclerosi.

IV

Una settimana dopo, l'autunno era calato inavvertito sulla campagna cambiando colore alle cose quasi da un giorno all'altro. Aveva piovuto poi era tornato il sole, a Pescia c'era stato lo sciopero degli operai delle cartiere e delle concerie; in Piazza Grande c'era stata animazione: con le spalle appoggiate al muro gruppi d'operai discutevano e non tutti sembravano d'accordo.

« Ora scioperano anche. Che vadano al diavolo, a morire di fame se vogliono », borbottava Venturino. Anche i suoi operai erano saliti fino alla villa per metterlo al corrente delle decisioni prese dal sindacato provinciale. « Tornate al lavoro quando volete » gli aveva risposto lui, « ma non venite qui, perché a me non me ne interessa nulla. Anche gli scioperi, ora! ». Gli operai se n'erano andati senza replicare, ma di lui avevano parlato lungo la strada del ritorno.

« L'uomo più ricco di Pescia ».

« Che porcheria ».

« Una bestia ».

« No, un ladro ».

Il padrone del bar di Piazza Grande aveva visto rompersi la consuetudine, il suo cliente ora non veniva più tutti i giorni alla stessa ora: « A me che m'importa. Non mi arricchiva mica con un ponce al giorno e qualche bicchierino ».

« Che ci faceva tutto il pomeriggio seduto lì, in dieci anni ha fatto fatica a salutare dieci persone » aveva detto il droghiere.

« Ora si crede un signore, ma è un contadino andato a male ».

« C'è del marcio, c'è del marcio ».

« Ci sarà quello che volete, ma lui ha quello che occorre per infischiarne, e fa bene ».

« Certo i soldi son soldi e, chi li ha, ha in mano la frusta ».

Anche Francesco non si era più visto scendere regolarmente al caffè; ma la sua mancanza non la notava quasi nessuno, di lui si parlava ben poco sulla piazza.

Solo il tabaccaio aveva detto: « Quello ha comprato un microscopio e ora si rovina la vista. Che pazzo! ».

Quel giorno però Venturino e Francesco furono di nuovo visti al solito posto. « Rieccoli ».

V

Un buco nel giornale, una cosa da poco, ma che cosa non può bastare in certi casi? Venturino carrellava sulla piazza col suo obbiettivo segreto, ma questa volta guardava distratto. In ogni modo non gli occorreva molto di più che un'occhiata distratta per accorgersi che i bottegai di Piazza Grande spesso, quando stavano un poco fuori del loro negozio al sole, si voltavano verso la sua parte. — M'invidieranno magari, certo è che ai loro occhi ora sono cresciuto. — Il suo sorriso in questo caso era cattivo, come se più che provarne soddisfazione tutto ciò gli suscitasse odio. — Terra di pidocchi questa, ma ora io vivo lassù in alto. — Ma con tutto ciò era distratto.

Arrivò il pulman di Firenze; Venturino voltò il buco del giornale verso lo sportello da cui discendevano i passeggeri che finivano lì il proprio viaggio. Continuò a guardare ancora per un minuto, prima di alzarsi per andare incontro ad una elegante signora che sorvegliava la discesa dei propri bagagli. Poi si alzò, si scorsero, si avvicinarono lentamente, si strinsero la mano. Dai negozi, come sempre succede quando arriva la corriera, tutti son venuti un poco sulla soglia per abitudine, ma questa volta la curiosità generica, per tutti, si localizza immediatamente sulla forestiera. « Per quello era tornato al caffè! ».

Francesco, aveva alzato un attimo l'occhio dal microscopio per guardare fuori della finestra, ed anche lui non tornò subito alle sue faccende: « Eh, eh! Guarda un po' ».

Intanto Agostino era sbucato da qualche parte, si era avvicinato, aveva preso le valigie e le caricava sull'automobile che partiva poi sotto gli sguardi curiosi di molte persone.

« Sono venuta volentieri, ma ci ho pensato un poco. Capirai ».

« Anch'io ho pensato un poco prima di scriverti ma poi ho deciso che potevo farlo. Infatti eccoti, sono molto contento ».

« Sei gentile ».

« Tu, ad essere venuta. Stai molto bene ».

« Non meglio di te, gli anni passano e le donne invecchiano molto più presto ».

« Non lo dire che non ne hai nessuna ragione ».

« Beh ».

La sera, quando erano seduti a tavola, non appena suonarono le otto e mezza Venturino disse:

« L'hai sentito l'orologio? ».

« Sì, è sul tipo di quello che sta sulla scala di casa mia. Lo ricordi? ».

« Lo ricordo ».

VI

Marianna si era trovata bene nella villa, aveva ritrovato in Venturino l'uomo che conosceva, anzi maturato, corretto in molte delle cadenze giovanili, dei suoi modi, come lei li ricordava. L'aveva complimentato per il buon gusto nella scelta della sua nuova casa, e si era messa subito all'opera facendo progetti su certi cambiamenti che le sembravano necessari per sveltirla, senza toccarne il carattere che lei parve ottimo.

I loro rapporti, dopo un primo momento d'impaccio che solo loro due potevano avere avvertito, erano divenuti amichevoli e spontanei, specialmente per merito di Marianna che aveva sempre avuta certa simpatica disinvoltura. Erano riusciti perfino ad avere dei momenti quasi allegri, ed erano arrivati addirittura a poter parlare dei loro tempi, a raccontarsi qualche cosa l'uno dell'altro.

Dieci giorni dopo, mentre Marianna era ancora in camera intenta sulla sua toilette un poco sofisticata, quella stessa che del resto aveva servito a conservarle una freschezza del tutto superiore alla sua età, udì al piano terreno uno strepito veramente eccessivo, una specie di turpiloquio che sul momento non seppe bene a chi attribuire. Ma prestando un poco di attenzione fu scossa profondamente nell'accorgersi che si trattava di Venturino il quale, alle prese non si capiva bene con chi, usciva in una serie di espressioni e di urli tutt'altro che gradevoli, ch'ella non avrebbe mai potuto attribuirgli se proprio, ascoltando, non ci fosse stata alcuna possibilità di dubitare.

Si trattava di Venturino alle prese col proprio ragioniere ed un piccolo gruppo di operai, che venivano ad informarlo degli sviluppi della loro vertenza sindacale e di alcune richieste particolari ch'essi, dicevano, avevano il diritto di avanzare nei suoi riguardi.

La cosa si protrasse per molto tempo e proprio quando stava per concludersi con quattro contumelie del padrone, sulla soglia della stanza apparve Marianna che aveva avuto tutto il tempo di finire e di scendere. Essa si diresse verso di lui che rimase muto, in una posa sgraziata che non ebbe il tempo e la prontezza di correggere e che non poté annullare col bel sorriso che fece seguire. « Dove eri? Agostino m'aveva detto che eri uscita ».

« No, questa mattina mi sono affacciata un poco in giardino, ma poi sono tornata su ».

« Aspetta un attimo, scusa ».

Venturino uscì dalla stanza, percorse il corridoio ed entrò nello stanzino dove s'era installato il ragazzo che, in quel momento, stava lucidando alcuni vecchi lumi di ottone.

« M'avevi detto che la signora era uscita ».

« L'ho vista scendere stamani ».

« Idiota ». Gli si avventò contro sordamente; Agostino si mise le

braccia incrociate sopra la testa, ma il padrone lo colpì ripetutamente coi pugni, sordamente, con colpi regolari e calcolati che durarono per un certo tempo, con un ritmo esasperante. Poi se ne tornò nella sala da Marianna, entrò nella stanza sorridente, fresco ed aggiustato.

« Che cosa è successo? ».

« Nulla, prima ho perduta la calma, con gli operai oggi non si sa più come ci si deve comportare. Io ne ho molti e, da queste parti venderebbero l'anima al diavolo per un centesimo ».

« Tu sei molto ricco Venturino? ».

« Sì, abbastanza, che c'entra? ».

« Allora avrai imparato a capire che la ricchezza comporta molte pene, molti obblighi, molte cose che non si risolvono e non si capiscono se si perde la pazienza. Non fai mica bene il tuo interesse in questo modo. Sbagli se tu credi che basti una opposizione di questo genere ».

« Ma io non mi oppongo, che cosa vuoi che mi interessi. Mi arrabbio, questo sì ».

« Credo di conoscerti abbastanza per permettermi di dirti questo ».

« Puoi dirmi tutto quello che vuoi, ma non aver troppa fiducia nel conoscermi bene ».

« Oh! Venturino, se non ci conosciamo noi! Io t'ho ritrovato quello che mi aspettavo tu fossi, quello che immaginavo dovevi esser diventato, ora che non siamo più dei giovanetti. Non ti lasciar prendere da queste ire inutili che sciupano la vita e sono brutte, non abbiamo nessuno, che ci dobbiamo accanire a fare? ».

« Che pensi? ».

« Che cosa vuoi che pensi; dico così perché a sentirti di su non sembravi nemmeno tu stesso ».

« Un momento d'ira ». Marianna sorrise compiaciuta, in questa remissività aveva ritrovato l'uomo che conosceva. Si misero a parlare di certi mobili e di qualche acquisto da fare a Firenze. « Ci andremo assieme ».

Poi Marianna, da buona torinese, riprese il discorso sugli operai e sul problema del lavoro. « Necessità sociali. Diritti delle maestranze. Tempi nuovi ». Nel suo discorso c'erano delle frasi di questo genere che, normalmente, in Venturino suscitavano un certo sordo risentimento del tutto gratuito, perché in questi casi finiva sempre per concludere che a lui non gliene importava nulla e che non capiva perché, in quelle occasioni, gli salisse il sangue alla testa. Ma questa volta, ascoltando il discorso un poco noioso e molto meccanico che sbucava fuori dalla piemontese, piuttosto che adirarsi, pur non perdendo una sola parola di ciò che la donna diceva, si trovò a correre entro una serie di immagini, di pensieri. — Le notti all'osteria, il Giaccaì, Marianna; lei è qui, ma sono personaggi lontani. — Intanto assentiva meccanicamente

scuotendo la testa con una docilità che non gli costava nessuna fatica. — Il Giaccai, Marianna: non erano parenti quei due? Che cosa dico mai, perché dovrebbero essere parenti. Stupido modo di pensare; un delinquente ed una persona per bene, civile. Che vita lunga la mia. — Nell'altra zona dei suoi pensieri ricordava Marianna come un personaggio che non avesse più riveduto, ed invece stava lì e lui le parlava insieme. In quel momento, dal giardino, sulla soglia, si affacciò un uomo col berretto in mano; Venturino lo riconobbe, era un facchino del Mercato dei fiori, un uomo stipendiato da Francesco.

« Che cosa vuoi? ».

« Permesso? ».

« Vieni avanti ».

« Mi manda la moglie del signor Francesco ».

« Perché? ».

« Il signor Francesco è morto, nella sua stanza, mentre guardava in quel cannocchiale ».

« Sarà stato il microscopio. Ma come è morto? ».

« È caduto per terra ed è morto ». Venturino tacque e l'uomo rimase in piedi. Poi Venturino disse:

« E allora ».

« Allora io dovevo dirglielo e gliel'ho detto. Arrivederla ».

« Chi era? », chiese Marianna.

« Un tipo ».

« Un tuo amico? ».

« Sì, è morto, che cosa c'entro io. Se è morto non c'è nulla da fare ».

« Penso che faresti meglio ad andare ».

« E perché? ».

« Come perché. Era un tuo amico, ha una moglie ».

« Una moglie ed una figlia ».

« Ma che cosa è questa storia? ».

« Certo hai ragione, sarà bene che vada ».

« Vai, vai, ti aspetterò ».

VII

Agostino era rimasto nello stanzino piegato in due: si teneva il ventre dolorante per i pugni, stava immobile con gli occhi aperti e fissi. Era come se non avesse pensieri; ma qualche cosa di profondo e violento circolava in lui assieme al flusso accelerato del sangue. Non era la prima volta: quando veniva battuto stringeva il labbro, rimaneva un poco fermo ed aspettava che passasse quel ritmo incalzante, che si spegnesse, finché per contrasto tutto pareva spegnersi in lui, poi riprendeva il lavoro applicandosi maledettamente. Ma questa volta

tardava a ritrovare quella pesantezza naturale della sua mente che l'aveva vertiva di vivere, e non pensava di rimettersi al lavoro. Non conosceva quasi altro che quegli embrioni di sensazioni che erano i suoi sentimenti se non proprio i suoi pensieri, perciò non avrebbe saputo dire che un tragico sentimento di se stesso l'opprimeva. Non aveva mai avuto nessuno con cui parlare e la sua esistenza era tutta lì.

Questa volta, forse la prima, non si rimise al lavoro, forse le percosse avevano lasciato un segno più dolorante che continuava a farsi sentire, non solo perché il padrone era stato più violento del solito, ma perché l'aveva percosso con una ira fredda che aveva rimosso in lui qualche cosa di più profondo che il solo istinto di difesa, qualche cosa di incomprensibile per lui.

Quando si sentì meglio attraversò il corridoio e si mise seduto sulla porticina di servizio che usciva sul dietro della villa: le donne erano in cucina o per la casa in faccende e lui rimase lì, seduto e indisturbato, a guardare la collina che degradava poco distante, le foglie dei filari delle viti accese dei colori dell'autunno.

Agostino era orfano; sua madre era morta non sapeva bene quando: suo padre, operaio della conceria di Venturino, era morto alcuni anni avanti in un incidente sul lavoro. Era caduto dal più alto ripiano dell'essiccatoio mentre stendeva le pelli, un'asse del ripiano si era staccata e lui era precipitato nel vuoto. Quando il fatto era accaduto Agostino si trovava a scuola dove frequentava una delle prime classi elementari, vennero a prenderlo, poi seppe che il padre era morto e che il padrone si sarebbe interessato di lui rimasto ormai solo. Infatti l'aveva preso al proprio servizio, eppoi, chi si era più ricordato che anche Agostino era una creatura di questo mondo? Eppure anche lui c'era.

La verità era stata ancora più cruda. Venturino, per la morte di quell'operaio doveva riparare di persona, perché la maggior parte della responsabilità venne data alla ditta la cui attrezzatura trascurata era risultata pericolosa. Venturino aveva rimediato facendo un certo compromesso per il quale si sarebbe interessato della educazione del ragazzo e l'aveva preso con sé. Da allora chi si era più ricordato di quel ragazzo?

Allo stabilimento Agostino aveva appreso come era morto suo padre e, qualche volta, gli passava per la mente quella scena, specialmente quando saliva col padrone proprio al piano dell'essiccatoio da cui era caduto.

Ora se ne stava lì, guardava la collina che, dopo un ripiano erboso, saliva ripida; pensava a qualche cosa, pensava che si sentiva stanco, che le percosse del padrone erano state dure, ed infine era costretto ad accorgersi che qualche cosa saliva dallo stomaco, dal di dentro, e lo inondava d'un penoso desiderio di gridare; stringeva i pugni e se lui guardava tutto preso da un leggero tremito che non sapeva spiegarli.

Eppure c'era nei suoi occhi una dolcezza tutt'altro che animale, la pesantezza della sua figura abbandonata non poteva del tutto distruggere certa gentilezza di alcuni tratti del suo profilo, accentuata dal color biondo dei suoi capelli.

Di fondo al prato, mentre se ne stava seduto sullo scalino, vide avanzare una ragazza; la riconobbe subito, era Natalina. — È bionda come me. — Questo pensiero lo calmò subitamente. Natalina si avvicinò col suo solito incedere che non cambiava mai ritmo nemmeno in vista del punto in cui si dirigevano i suoi passi.

« C'è il padrone? ».

« No, è uscito ».

« Allora l'aspetto ».

« Lo aspetti pure, ma se fossi in lei magari tornerei un'altra volta, proprio una volta ci vuole venire ».

« Ho fatto tutta questa strada apposta per parlare con lui ».

« Ci parli, ci parli; quando viene si faccia vedere da sé, però; io è meglio che non glielo vada a dire ».

« Non occorre, ci penserò da me. Ha mal di pancia, Agostino? ».

« Sì, mi fa male qua e alla testa; ma passerà ».

« Avrò mangiato troppo » concluse la ragazza. Poi, dopo un certo tempo riprese: « qui da mangiare non deve davvero mancare ».

« Nessuno me lo conta, posso mangiare tutto quello che voglio ».

« Eh ».

« Ma lo pago » aggiunse Agostino dopo un attimo di esitazione.

« Che non si paga? Siamo nati per pagare tutto quello che ci viene e anche quello che non ci viene, delle volte ».

Agostino, a questa frase si voltò verso la ragazza dubbioso d'aver capito il senso delle sue parole e profondamente scosso dal modo di parlare di Natalina, che, a lui, sembrò preoccupante. Borbottò qualche cosa d'incomprensibile, poi tutt'un tratto rispose:

« Ma io pago troppo ».

« Non è mai troppo, mi creda. Bisogna accettare ».

« Così uno finisce per farsi ammazzare ».

« Nulla ammazza, si muore quando è il momento ».

« Lei potrà dirlo perché ha della terra e una casa; ma io ».

« Non si può mai dire, c'è chi ha le ricchezze e le automobili ed è peggio di noi ».

« Ma non avere nessuno ».

« Quando non si ha nessuno, sembra, che non ci sia nessuno; ma soli non siamo mai, nessuno è proprio solo ».

« Come fa a parlare così? ».

« Io sono stata dalle monache, so alcune cose ».

Tacquero a lungo; Natalina guardando dove prima s'era distratto il ragazzo, mentre Agostino ormai guardava per terra, a testa china.

Dopo, muovendosi come se stesse per iniziare un lavoro faticoso, disse:

« Ma ci sono delle cose che non sono giuste ».

« Non sono giuste ».

« Ma ci sono delle persone che sarebbe meglio che non ci fossero ».

« Questo non lo possiamo dire ».

« Ma ci sono ».

« Se ci sono si vede che ci debbono essere ».

« Ma uno se le togliesse dal mondo farebbe del bene ».

« Del bene si fa solo col bene. Bisogna ragionare in questo mondo ».

« Ma che vuol ragionare! Vede, io, qualche volta, penso che sarebbe meglio che suo zio non ci fosse ».

« Non è possibile che ci siano degli uomini così, non è possibile e se qualcuno facesse qualche cosa non ci sarebbero ».

« Qualche cosa delle volte mi viene in mente di farlo ».

« Che vuole dire? ». Per la prima volta da quando parlavano si guardarono in faccia. Per Agostino quello era forse il dialogo più lungo e più faticoso della propria vita. Parlando era come se scoprisse che anche lui conosceva delle parole.

« Voglio dire che mi nascono dei pensieri quando quell'uomo mi fa tanto soffrire ».

« Questo lo immagino ».

« Mi picchia come fossi una bestia ».

« Nemmeno le bestie si dovrebbero picchiare ».

« Mio padre morì perché si ribaltò quella tavola, lo sa? ».

« Ne ho sentito parlare ».

« Ne potrebbe anche ribaltare un'altra delle tavole all'essiccatoio ».

Natalina soprappensiero assentì con la testa; ma un attimo dopo trasalì. « No, che intende dire. No, dal male non nasce che il male ».

VIII

Se non ci fosse stata Marianna presente Venturino non sarebbe andato a casa di Francesco. — Che vado a fare, ormai è morto. Si capiva che sarebbe finito così. Eppoi che c'entro io? Certo, si muore e con questo, che cosa ci posso fare. Si usa andare a casa dei morti? e se le tengano le loro usanze. —

Trovò la signora Carmela assistita dalla figlia che, però, andava su e giù per la casa dove c'era qualche persona che entrava o che usciva. Grassoccia anche lei, col viso rosso e la pelle leggermente untuosa come quella del marito, a Venturino sembrò ributtante. Aveva i capelli in disordine, la fronte infuocata. Venturino non trovò subito il contegno adatto, mormorò qualche parola senza senso, ed il suo volto che esprimeva palesemente disgusto poteva anche sembrare quello di un uomo addolorato.

La donna, che in molti tratti rassomigliava davvero stranamente il marito, quando vide entrare Venturino gettò un grido acuto, si alzò in un attimo poi ricadde sulla poltrona coprendosi il viso con le mani. Quando si rivolse di nuovo verso di lui che era rimasto lì, in silenzio, pensando a come liberarsi al più presto, disse, quasi sempre gridando:

« Se lo ricorda quant'era buono il mio Francesco ». Poi, con gli occhi sbarrati, alzandosi in piedi gli si avvicinò. Non v'era l'ombra di una lacrima sulla lucida pelle del suo viso. « Non voglio che sia morto ».

« Lei non vuole, ma... ».

« No! » La figlia accorse e cercò di calmare la mamma; di là dalla porta c'era qualcun altro che non osava entrare.

« Io ho bisogno di lui ».

— Perché ha bisogno di lui, a che poteva servirgli — pensò Venturino.

« Ho bisogno di lui » disse freddamente la donna, poi, improvvisamente, si mise a correre, uscì, tornò sempre correndo e si fermò davanti a Venturino sventolando alcuni stracci a righe, se li portò in faccia, gridò di dolore, poi riprese:

« Questo è il suo pigiama, c'è ancora il suo odore, si sente ancora il mio Francesco. Senta! » Premé l'indumento in faccia a Venturino che non fece a tempo a ritrarsi. Il pigiama aveva davvero un odore acuto, animalesco, che sconvolse fin nel fondo delle viscere Venturino il quale fece un passo indietro inorridito.

« Ha sentito! È il suo odore. E' lui, è lui e io... io lo rivotiglio. Ho bisogno di lui ». Nel dire questo la donna si era piantata in mezzo alla stanza a gambe larghe, minacciosa; ed alla figlia che le s'era avvicinata per cercare di calmarla, disse:

« Via » poi si rimise nella poltrona affondando la faccia nel pigiama, mugolando senza piangere.

Venturino era rimasto impietrito, quasi con le spalle appoggiate alla parete e, se si fosse potuto vedere, avrebbe stentato a riconoscersi. Era certo la prima volta che qualche cosa l'aveva indotto a sbarrare gli occhi d'orrore e di paura: era paura, era qualche cosa che lo impietriva di smarrimento, più per l'orrenda novità della sensazione, che per la forza violenta con cui qualche cosa gli era penetrato dentro senza che ancora se ne rendesse conto. Prima di allora non aveva mai guardato quella piccola donna che ora non gli sarebbe stato facile dimenticare. Ad un certo punto si accorse che la figlia del morto ed un'altra persona che si era fatta avanti, guardavano lui dimenticando per un attimo la vedova che sragionava. Si riscosse, alzò un braccio quasi avesse voluto carezzare la testa della donna, poi fece un passo indietro, balbettò qualche cosa d'incomprensibile, infine disse:

« Scusate, lui non voglio vederlo. Scusate, sono, ero amico di lui.

Buongiorno ». Quasi corse, discese le scale e, solo in Piazza Grande, abbagliato dal sole, inondato dallo scampanio di mezzogiorno, si riebbe: gli parve di risentire il calore del proprio sangue; ma fatti i primi passi sentì che camminava malsicuro. — Che cosa c'era tra quei due? Possibile. — Entrò nel bar e si fece servire un cognac che bevve coi piedi per ritornare immediatamente nel sole della piazza, irritato contro se stesso, contro qualche cosa che gli s'era attaccata addosso, che lui aveva ferito dentro senza pietà. Si accorse che faceva sforzi disperati come fosse assalito da un nemico, poi si diresse verso la macchia e partì velocemente, disattento, stanco e spaventato.

A casa trovò Marianna seduta nel giardino a godersi quel tardivo ritorno di calore estivo nel paesaggio autunnale, carico di colori vivi ed insoliti. Lui le si mise seduto vicino.

« È stato triste », domandò Marianna.

« Non avrei dovuto andare ».

« Ma non mi pareva davvero che tu fossi troppo dispiaciuto ».

« Io di queste cose, di queste cose non so, non voglio sapere » rispose seccamente.

« Oggi sembri proprio di cattivo umore, mi dispiace, una cattiva giornata ». Venturino scosse le spalle e rimase muto. Marianna rimase perplessa, si era abituata a conoscere in Venturino un uomo assai comunicativo se non loquace.

« Oggi è una cattiva giornata, ne capitano, ci vuole pazienza, non vale la pena di cambiare d'umore ».

« Ci sono delle giornate in cui ci si accorge di un monte di cose ».

« L'esperienza che aumenta ».

« Gli anni che aumentano ».

« Non parlare di anni tu, che sembra non siano passati per te ».

« Non sono gli anni, io non sono mutato davvero ».

« Ma oggi sei un poco turbato. Forse facevi davvero meglio a non andare ».

« Che vuoi che sappiamo gli uni degli altri. Nulla! ».

« Ma io posso esserti utile Venturino, forse ».

L'uomo si mise ad osservare attentamente la donna, poi rise leggermente stringendo gli occhi.

« Ridi ».

« Noi ci siamo stati utili, ma non necessari ».

« È un modo troppo crudo di definire un sentimento civile dei rapporti umani ». In quel momento una nuvola isolata tolse loro il sole al quale si riscaldavano, ed un attimo dopo la realtà dell'autunno inoltrato li fece rabbrivire di freddo.

« Non ho portata la pelliccia e invece farebbe comodo. Bisogna che me ne faccia una nuova. A Torino c'era sul mercato del castoro, buonissimo prezzo, ma io sono stata pigra ».

« Sarà stato castorino; ci sono delle concie che ingannano e permettono d'imbrogliare facilmente il prossimo ». In fondo alla stanza, in piedi, addossata alla parete, un'esile triste figura se ne stava immobile, con le braccia inerti abbandonate lungo i fianchi. Venturino la riconobbe subito e Marianna, scorgendola, stava appena osservando la singolarità di quel misero ed in qualche modo affascinante personaggio, quando un grido secco la fece trasalire:

« Di dove sei entrata! ».

Natalina indicò verso la porta del corridoio senza parlare.

« Chi ti ha fatta entrare? ».

« Nessuno, non mi ha vista nessuno ».

« Vattene. Non si entra in casa d'altri ». Il tono di Venturino era tale che, Marianna, dopo un attimo d'esitazione, si credette in dovere d'intervenire.

« Non così, la spaventerai ».

« Credo che non sia tanto facile ». Infatti la ragazza era rimasta immobile e impassibile nel suo solito atteggiamento di attesa.

« Vattene, torna un'altra volta » disse Venturino, moderando la voce ed il gesto. La ragazza non si mosse, approfittò d'un attimo di silenzio e disse pacatamente:

« Noi abbiamo da parlare. Ve lo dissi che sarei tornata ».

« Vuoi altre mille lire, è quello che vuoi? » chiese Venturino con voce quasi carezzevole.

« Non vengo per questo; è dei vostri genitori che dobbiamo parlare ».

Marianna era rimasta ad ascoltare, interdetta ed interessatissima; il singolare comportamento della fanciulla non poteva non suscitare un vivo sentimento di curiosità; a quest'ultima frase essa si voltò verso Venturino che quasi si era dimenticato della sua presenza; i loro sguardi s'incontrarono proprio mentre lui borbottava rabbiosamente una imprecazione.

« Oggi sei proprio di cattivo umore. Non sapevo che tu avessi ancora i genitori ».

« Ma che vuoi che abbia, io ». Venturino ora parlava con una calma fredda, tuttavia non nascondeva completamente il suo atroce disappunto. La presenza dell'amica lo costringeva a controllarsi, perciò con persuasiva dolcezza si rivolse di nuovo a Natalina:

« Vattene, torna un altro giorno ».

Difficile sarebbe dire fino a che punto Natalina comprendesse il vantaggio che le derivava dalla presenza della forestiera, ma ne intuiva perfettamente la portata con quell'istinto vigile che nulla lasciava trasparire nella dolce freddezza con la quale stava lì, inamovibile.

« Già che sono qui è meglio che ci diciamo queste cose. Sono vecchi e quando saranno morti non servirà più a nulla ».

« Morti! » gridò Venturino e si lasciò cadere su una poltrona. Ora anche Marianna era lì immobile, incapace di comprendere ma quasi spaventata da quell'oscura vibrazione di sottintesi che creavano nell'ambiente uno stato di tensione quasi doloroso. Sicuramente però, malgrado tutto ciò, non mancò nemmeno una punta di quella certa malizia che la curiosità femminile sfodera ogni qualvolta è sollecitata, quando disse:

« E lasciala parlare ».

Venturino non reagì, ormai sapeva che non vi era nessuna possibilità di sottrarsi; si accorse che non poteva tutto salvare, ed allora, rivolto a Marianna, disse:

« Tu non conosci molto della mia vita, ognuno sa di sé ».

« Che intendi dire? ».

Venturino non seppe bene che cosa rispondere e pensò fosse meglio affrontare la situazione rivolgendosi verso la fanciulla:

« Parla tu, biondina, vediamo che cosa hai da dire ».

« Io potrei anche non parlare, voi lo sapete bene perché sono qui, ho da dire sempre le stesse cose; ma se volete proprio che parli si fa presto: vostro padre e vostra madre ormai non sanno più come vivere, sono vecchi e voi siete ricco. Come si fa a non capire questo, io lo domando a voi ».

« Io non ho spiegazioni da dare a te. Come si fa l'hai visto, ed ora se te ne vai è meglio, lascia correre, almeno per ora ».

« Capisco bene quello che dite, ma non mi rispondete mai ».

« Io invece non capisco che cosa vuoi da me e finirò per perdere davvero la pazienza. Non è il momento ora, vattene ».

Lo sguardo di Marianna si rianimò tutt'un tratto: « Ma, forse, Venturino, questa ragazza sta inventando una storia? ».

« Sta giuocando col fuoco; m'importuna solo perché sono ricco, se fossi povero non saprebbe nemmeno che esisto ».

« Certo, allora non ci sarebbe ragione » disse precipitosamente Natalina a questo punto.

« Se non ti senti posso parlare io con questa ragazza, la convincerò io ad andarsene. Lascia fare a me ». Per un attimo Venturino sembrò accettare la proposta di Marianna, ma subito dopo capì che sarebbe stata una soluzione peggiore del male che ne poteva nascere.

« No, lascia stare, non approderai a nulla. Io sono al punto in cui debbo far capire ad ogni costo a questa stupida creatura che non voglio essere disturbato, che non credo a nessun obbligo, che non mi si può sopraffare con nulla, nemmeno con quell'arietta santificata che mi fa perdere il bene della ragione ».

« Ma lei continua a dire dei tuoi genitori ».

Venturino, nel concludere la sua ultima frase si era lasciato palesemente trasportare da uno scoppio d'ira rattenuta, cruda, si sentiva

nella voce una tesa fermezza che stava per spezzarsi. Si limitò a rispondere con un vago mugolio di fastidio.

« Io non capisco », concluse allora Marianna.

« Che cosa vuoi capire anche tu. Ognuno è quello che è e basta ».

« E la ragazza chi è? »

« Sono figlia di suo fratello che non c'è più ».

« Tua nipote ».

« Una stracciona intrigante », proruppe Venturino.

« Ma perché sei divenuto così ».

« Divenuto? Ebbene, io non sono divenuto nulla; che ricordo hai di me? buono, tientelo, vattene anche te, andiamocene, lasciamo sola questa ragazza, parliamo d'altro! »

« Venturino, vuoi lasciar fare a me? »

« No, finirà che deciderò io ed allora questa storia smetterà davvero ».

« A me non fate paura, lo sapete », disse a questo punto Natalina che era rimasta silenziosa ed immota ad ascoltare. Poi aggiunse: « Bisogna trovare un modo di ragionare, lo troveremo se volete ».

« Oh! povera piccola, che cosa sperì; non hai ancora capito bene... »

« Calmati Venturino », disse Marianna, poi si rivolse alla ragazza: « Senti figliola, ora forse è meglio che tu te ne vada, vedrò io di parlare con Venturino, forse io potrò... ». Si fermò a metà della frase, vedendo con quale decisione la ragazza scuoteva negativamente la testa per dirle che non si sarebbe mossa da lì. Allora essa si rivolse di nuovo all'uomo che stava ancora seduto con i pugni serrati sui braccioli della poltrona:

« Mi sembra una storia piuttosto poco simpatica, tu potresti dire qualche cosa, no? ».

Venturino si alzò in piedi gridando: « Basta! Basta! Lasciatemi in pace. Basta, vattene, andatevene. Via! » Marianna indietreggiò spaventata, per un attimo fu incerta, poi disse seccamente:

« Me ne vado davvero ». Ed uscì dalla stanza diretta in camera sua. Appena se ne fu andata Venturino si rivolse verso Natalina borbottando con odio:

« Maledetta. Che cosa ridicola ». Natalina non batté ciglio, non disse nulla, con le braccia abbandonate lungo i fianchi lo guardava e sembrava quasi assente. Allora Venturino continuò: « Che cosa puoi mai sperare, dove vuoi arrivare. Io non ho nulla da dirti, più nulla, non mi resta che scacciarti in un modo che ricorderai per tutta la vita ».

« Voi potete anche picchiarmi, ma questo non cambia nulla, noi dobbiamo parlare ».

Non c'era via d'uscita, l'estrema e pacata gentilezza di quel volto annebbiava la coscienza dell'uomo che, per la prima volta in vita sua,

non trovava quella soluzione di rottura che l'aveva sempre aiutato a risolvere tutte le situazioni ed esplodere liberato, vincitore.

« Potete anche battermi, ma non cambia nulla », ripeté la ragazza. Era davvero quello che Venturino stava per fare, ma lo tratteneva un dubbio: a che avrebbe servito?

« Vattene, che puoi mai sperare? ». Pareva che, improvvisamente, alla paurosa tensione fosse subentrata una fredda calma, tra loro due. Venturino non sembrava più agitato pazzamente come si poteva intuire un momento prima: alzò la sua grande mano e colpì due, tre volte il viso di Natalina con una violenza straordinaria; ma la ragazza sembrò piantata sul pavimento, non si mosse più di quel tanto a cui fu costretta dalla violenza delle percosse, ed i suoi occhi di smalto si dilatarono senza nulla esprimere.

« Ora te ne andrai perché ti distruggo ».

« Me ne andrò, ma mi rivedrete ancora, voi dovrete intendere quello che voglio dire ».

« Signor Venturino, il pranzo si fredda », disse in quel momento la cameriera dalla soglia d'una stanza vicina; ma l'uomo non sembrò avere udito, mentre Natalina a passi delicatissimi uscì dalla porta del corridoio dove incontrò Agostino che stava nell'ombra, appiattito contro il muro: si scambiarono uno sguardo silenzioso mentre il ragazzo la seguì fin sull'uscio.

IX

Verso sera riprese a piovere e, sul calar della notte, sembrò che ogni colore, ogni carattere stagionale annegasse nella monotonia dell'inverno. Venturino era stato tutto il giorno chiuso nello studio a pianare il terreno, un poco immobile davanti alla vetrata, un poco intento a leggere delle carte, un poco con l'orecchio teso per sentire se Marianna scendeva dalla sua stanza. Aveva fumato il sigaro, bevuto un poco di cognac, ma il silenzio pesava su di lui ed aveva ripensato a Francesco. Un giorno l'amico morto l'aveva fatto molto ridere con la sua teoria sul giuoco del Lotto: « Non bisogna mai segnare sulla cedola i numeri semplici » aveva detto « perché di quelli, sui novanta, ce ne sono solo nove mentre gli altri a due cifre sono ottantuno ed è perciò più facile che escano ». Venturino ricordava la propria risata e la stizza dell'ometto dal viso grasso: avevano poi discusso a lungo, ma non era riuscito a convincerlo; ora ci ripensava e non era sicuro d'aver ragione. — Confusione, confusione — pensava. Ad un certo punto prese tra le mani la spalliera di una sedia di Vienna e alzandola la sbatté per terra con violenza spezzandola. Agostino accorse e si affacciò sulla porta per vedere.

« Che vuoi, sciocco ».

« Il rumore, signor Venturino ».

« Vattene ».

Agostino se ne tornò nel suo stanzino dove rimase indisturbato fino alla notte.

Era già notte quando Marianna discese dalla sua stanza; entrò con passo sicuro, accese la luce e si trovò faccia a faccia con Venturino sprofondato in una poltrona. Egli non modificò per nulla l'espressione dura e tristemente tesa del suo volto, non certo privo di quel fascino maschio ed un poco felino ch'ella conosceva bene. La disinvoltura della donna che, in qualche modo, abbozzò una smorfia simile ad un sorriso leggermente artefatto lo irritò, ma rimasero in silenzio a guardarsi. La pendola suonò le otto e mezza. Infine la donna disse:

« È l'ultima sera, domani parto, c'è un treno all'alba. Vogliamo cenare assieme? »

« Certamente ».

Consumarono gran parte della cena in silenzio, pareva che dovessero arrivare alla fine senza dirsi una parola, quando Venturino inaspettatamente si mise a parlare, con voce profonda e pacata.

« Io non ho nulla da pentirmi, nulla da dire ».

« Quanto siamo soli, mio caro. Io non ho che la melanconia da sopportare; tu che cosa sopporti nella tua solitudine? »

Venturino rispose con un gesto di stizza, ma si ricompose, tacque un poco, infine:

« Cosa vuoi che abbia, nulla; non ho nulla da sopportare, sono contento così, contento di me ».

« La bellezza di quella ragazza mi ha sbalordito ».

« Hai il cuore tenero tu ».

« Ne hai conosciute tutte le tenerezze e non te ne sei lamentato ».

« Oh, Marianna! » Venturino accompagnò la frase con un gesto vago della mano.

« Ma non pensi che si muore, che cosa vuoi, non siamo più dei ragazzi, che cosa si può volere se si è soli? »

Venturino si alzò in piedi improvvisamente alterato, parve pallido, posò i pugni sulla tovaglia, sembrò volesse parlare, magari gridare, ma non disse nulla ed uscì dalla stanza: suonarono le nove e mezza.

Marianna rimase assorta fin quando la cameriera venne a sprecchiare, aspettò che stesce per uscire poi le disse:

« Per favore mi vuol mandare il ragazzo ».

« Conosci quella ragazza bionda che oggi è venuta qui? » chiese ad Agostino non appena le si presentò.

« Sì signora ».

« Sta lontana? »

« Lontana no ».

« Mi ci accompagni? »

Agostino assentì con la testa e dopo poco uscirono assieme. La terra bagnata di pioggia odorava, la notte era nera ed ingoiava il paesaggio davanti a loro; ma Agostino conosceva la strada metro per metro.

« Dove sarà andato il padrone? »

« Non lo so, ha preso la macchina ».

« Esce spesso la notte? »

« Quasi mai ».

« Tu sei da molto con lui? »

« Assai tempo ».

Camminarono in silenzio per un quarto d'ora. Marianna che da tanti anni non aveva mai più trascorso un poco di tempo in campagna, sperduta in quel buio umido e profumato si sentiva bene.

« Mi picchia », disse ad un tratto Agostino che, evidentemente, seguiva nella propria mente il dialogo interrotto al principio della passeggiata.

« Mi picchia », ripeté con una certa angoscia nella voce.

Marianna sentì freddo alla schiena, era l'aria pungente, ma era soprattutto l'agghiacciamento d'una pena che le penetrava profonda nelle viscere. Non aveva mai incontrato nulla di simile nella sua vita; negli ultimi anni poi s'era trovata più docile alla commozione, si era associata ad una iniziativa di beneficenza per i poveri e si era commossa molto spesso, felicitandosi poi con se stessa di certi umidori lacrimali provocati da alcune scene di povertà incontrate in alcuni quartieri popolari di Torino. Ciò che però le circolava nel sangue in quel momento non aveva nulla a che fare con tutto questo. Le sembrava che Agostino le avesse porto la propria sofferenza come un oggetto pesante, come una cosa vera, di piombo, che le pesasse sulle braccia. Rispose con una frase banale, una frase che a lei stessa non diceva nulla, ma era l'unica che le fosse venuta spontanea.

« Bisogna aver fede lo stesso ».

« Ma non è giusto », rispose Agostino con grossolana asprezza. Erano arrivati al limitare della strada che conduceva verso la casa dei Frateschi. S'inoltrarono sull'aia e tutto era buio, un silenzio compatto regnava tutt'attorno.

« Bisogna chiamare », disse Agostino.

« Chiamiamo ».

« Natalina, Natalina! » fece il ragazzo a bassa voce, sotto le finestre.

Non dovettero aspettare molto: Natalina non dormiva. Quando sentì la voce che la chiamava trasalì, ma si diresse subito verso la finestra, sicura che qualcuno l'aveva realmente chiamata.

Discese senza pensare alla sua veste. Era coperta soltanto d'una piccola camicia da bambina, lisa e di colore ormai del tutto incerto,

di misura preoccupantemente inadeguata; le sue gambe erano scoperte fin oltre il ginocchio e, la stoffa consunta, modellava un corpo singolare, longilineo e profondamente marcato, macilento e solido nello stesso tempo. Agostino chiuse gli occhi quando la intravide, e disse:

« Le ho accompagnata la signora ».

« Avrai freddo, figliola », disse Marianna che ora si sentiva imbarazzata. Era corsa là, ma ora le pareva di non aver più le idee chiare. « Vatti a mettere qualche cosa addosso ».

La ragazza non aveva dimostrato stupore o curiosità, non aveva detto nulla; salì, ridiscese con una coperta militare sulle spalle ed accese una candela per illuminare la cucina. Infine parlò.

« Discorriamo piano, ho paura che si sveglino ».

« Oggi, Natalina, avrei voluto dirti qualche cosa, ma non era possibile ».

« Non era possibile; ma è stato bene che ci foste voi, signora ».

« Volevo vederti, parlare un poco ora ». Natalina rimase muta ed anche Marianna sembrò non sapere che cosa aggiungere. La ragazza riprese:

« Lui dovrebbe capire tante cose ».

« Io lo conosco da tanto tempo, ma veramente non immaginavo nulla di simile ».

« È come un cieco, ma gli occhi ce l'ha ».

« Tu parli bene, Natalina », osservò Marianna.

« Ho studiato un poco dalle monache, ho imparato assai ».

« Ma che cosa sperì. Sarebbe meglio che tu lasciassi correre ».

« Io faccio quello che devo ». Il volto della fanciulla incorniciato nel disordine dei capelli leggerissimi s'imponeva d'una luminosa tristezza che non sfuggiva a Marianna; essa osservava attentamente la ragazza mentre il suo occhio andava lentamente abituandosi alla debole luce della candela. Ad un certo punto infatti poté distinguere che tra le tempie e l'orecchio Natalina aveva un'oscura lividura leggermente gonfia.

Non ebbe dubbi nemmeno per un attimo.

« Ti ha battuta? »

« Non fa nulla, io non faccio caso a questo ».

« È orrendo ». La voce della donna si fece acuta ed improvvisamente abbracciò la ragazza, le affondò la faccia nei capelli e fu scossa da due o tre singhiozzi violenti. L'unico a non capire bene, tra i tre, era Agostino il quale, in un angolo al buio, guardava ed ascoltava con gli occhi sbarrati mentre due aride ed insignificanti lacrime gli rigavano il volto senza che se ne accorgesse. Natalina aderì impercettibilmente all'abbraccio della sconosciuta; rimase limpida e impassibile.

« Ti porterò con me, devi andartene di qui; non potrai far nulla, tanto ».

« Non posso lasciare loro e debbo continuare ». Con la mano accennò al soffitto, al piano di sopra dove dormivano i vecchi.

« Io potrò fare qualche cosa anche per loro, per te ». Marianna ora guardava la struggente ignara bellezza della ragazza.

« Al servizio, per dir la verità, ho pensato spesso di andarci; ma voglio anche essere qui vicina, non voglio cedere ».

« Tornerai, potrai far meglio quello che vuoi; io ti aiuterò ».

« Voi signora siete brava ».

« Non so se sono brava, bambina. Del resto sono sola, la solitudine è brutta ».

« Avete visto lui? lui non sa più di nessuno ».

« Domani passerò a prenderti, parlane ai tuoi nonni. Verrò molto presto domani mattina ».

« Potrà venire, ma dovrò anche tornare qua. Mi pare che sarebbe male non tornare ».

« Tornerai quando credi ».

« Tornerò quando mi sembrerà che sia venuto il momento giusto ».

A Marianna in quell'istante passava nella mente qualche cosa di lontano. Lui, quel ragazzo così chiaramente bello e sconcertante; c'era qualche cosa di giusto a rammentarlo in quel momento. Sorrise e si sentì contenta.

« Sono contenta, Natalina. Vedrai che farai bene a venire. Torino non è poi così lontano ».

« So dov'è: Piemonte », disse la fanciulla.

« Parla ai tuoi, subito, domani mattina presto ». Natalina assentì scuotendo il capo.

X

Sulla soglia dell'osteria di Fontananova Venturino stette fermo; dentro era quasi silenzio ed attraverso i vetri opachi non si distingueva altro che la luce fluorescente; rimase in ascolto, sospeso, leggermente angosciato nell'attesa di premere la maniglia della porta per entrare. Stava per decidersi ma un accordo di chitarra lo trattenne e, subito dopo, una voce tenorile leggermente alterata ma assai graziosa attaccò una vecchia canzone che in quei luoghi si canta sempre da molto tempo.

*« Non è la morte la fin dell'amore,
Anche le tombe son templi d'amor;
Chiede all'amante l'amante che muore
Preci, ricordi, corone di fior ».*

S'appoggiò allo stipite della porta oppresso da una specie di stanchezza: se avesse potuto vedersi si sarebbe stupito di se stesso, sembrava abbattuto e non somigliava a nulla del suo passato.

*« Là nell'aprile fioriscon le rose,
Le verdi piagge, mia donna gentil;
Sulla mia tomba con mani pietose
Porta le rose del giovane april ».*

C'era la morte anche in questo canto, aveva mai pensato davvero alla morte Venturino?

*« Là nell'estate al fervido lampo
Vagan per l'aere pensieri d'amor,
Porta al mio sasso dei fiori di campo,
Ma pria sian strinti al tuo candido sen ».*

Un accordo lungo e sonoro tratto dalle corde basse della chitarra li diede il via ad un vociare di consenso, un applauso tutt'altro che contegnoso. Venturino alzò gli occhi verso l'alto, scrollò le spalle con stizza poi, con una mossa rapida, entrò aprendo la porta violentemente. Si fece di nuovo silenzio per un attimo; la luce l'abbagliò. Rivide i soliti cenci, le solite facce dai puntuti occhi neri, qualche barba incolta, qualche giovane in maglietta come se fosse ancora estate. Poi: « Da bere, vino, vino per tutti ». I Taddeucci, il Nini, il Passeretti gli furono attorno.

« È un signore lui ».

A quella frase Venturino fece una smorfia. La stessa voce che prima aveva cantato, dall'altra parte dello stanzone disse:

« Meno signori e più giustizia ».

« All'osteria non ci sono né signori né poveri », disse il Nini.

« Ben detto ».

« Venturino è un signore e ci offre da bere a tutti, tu faresti meglio a continuare a cantare invece di dire sciocchezze ».

« Io ho le mie idee, ma non rifiuto mai, e ringrazio chi mi offre da bere ».

« Viviamo in un buco, è un buco un paese come questo; per quello s'ha voglia di chiacchierare tanto e si dicono sciocchezze », concluse Venturino tutt'un tratto quasi allegro.

L'alba stava per affacciarsi sulle colline quando Venturino tornò a casa con la mente annebbiata, lo stomaco in disordine ed un po' intenerito, lui, di se stesso.

I

Natalina ritardò un poco e gli ospiti di Marianna, nell'attesa, sembrava provassero particolarmente gusto a parlare della ragazza toscana che, in un anno e mezzo, oltre a dimostrarsi una collaboratrice insostituibile nel lavoro, si era andata trasformando sotto i loro occhi.

« Una fortuna, una ragazza così », disse la signora Maino.

« Una fortuna che le invidio, Marianna », aggiunse il vecchio Maino.

Il signor Borsalino invece più che delle qualità pratiche della ragazza, sembrava fosse affascinato dalla singolare trasformazione ch'egli stesso aveva potuto constatare di persona, essendo tra i primi che aveva avvicinato Natalina non appena era arrivata dalla Toscana; anche il giovane Maino che fino a quel momento non aveva aperto bocca, su questo ebbe qualche cosa da dire e soltanto l'arrivo di Natalina pose fine a queste considerazioni.

In realtà, con quel vestitino grigio col colletto bianco, con quel volto il cui ovale pareva essersi perfezionato, quasi inarcando leggermente i segni attorno alla bocca che prima erano un poco più stirati, Natalina sembrava completamente trasformata; eppure tra tutti presenti, proprio Marianna che aveva seguito e in un certo modo operato quella trasformazione, pur non dicendolo era convinta che Natalina fosse quasi perfettamente la stessa del giorno in cui l'aveva incontrata. I suoi modi infatti erano sempre gli stessi, anche se ora sembrava più loquace, essendosi necessariamente adattata a parlare il tanto che la nuova situazione rendeva assolutamente necessario; e anche se qualche movenza sembrava più spigliata e meno rigida d'un tempo, in realtà si muoveva ancora con la stessa ritmica lentezza, spesso con le braccia abbandonate lungo i fianchi; le sue parole, se erano aumentate, non erano però troppo dissimili da quelle di un tempo, eccettuata certa sicurezza della conversazione che le veniva soprattutto dalla sua corretta parlata toscana la quale, in un ambiente fatto tutto di piemontesi, le consentiva di sentirsi perfettamente a posto, anzi maggiormente padrona anche tra i più svincolati dalla cadenza dialettale.

Natalina aveva deciso di tornare qualche settimana a Pescia, ed

era per questa ragione che Marianna aveva invitato alcuni amici per una cena che voleva essere anche un piccolo saluto al primo viaggio della ragazza, dopo tanto tempo di vita in comune.

Un anno e mezzo avanti Natalina aveva detto ai suoi: « Al servizio vanno tante. Qui bisogna far qualche cosa perché così non si può continuare; vado al servizio anch'io, vi manderò qualche soldo ». Non era stato facile. Il nonno, più che parlare si era irrigidito ostile e adolorato: nella famiglia dei Frateschi, al contrario che in tante altre famiglie di contadini del posto, non si ricordava che qualcuno avesse abbandonato la casa per andare al servizio. Nessuna donna dei Frateschi era andata in città a fare la serva. Il discorso, fatto di poche parole, di pochi gesti, ma di molti eloquenti silenzi, era durato qualche ora, iniziato all'alba; ma Natalina non era il genere di ragazza a cui si potesse far cambiare parere, questo lo sapevano tutti e tre i vecchi, e quando la signora venne a prenderla ed assicurò loro che la fanciulla sarebbe stata molto bene, essi non risposero nemmeno e chinarono la testa chiudendosi nel proprio rancore.

Prima d'arrivare a Torino Natalina già aveva cambiato il suo logoro grembiale con un vestitino acquistato a Pescia. Durante il viaggio Marianna l'aveva fatta parlare a lungo, e lei si era docilmente adattata a rispondere a tutte le domande ritenendo suo dovere assoggettarsi, abbandonarsi al volere altrui. Quando entrò nella casa trovò che vi erano già due cameriere e pensò che a lei sarebbero stati riservati i lavori più pesanti; ma rimase assai interdetta quando Marianna, rivolta ad una delle donne, disse che la signorina sarebbe rimasta nella casa e che, quella sera, avrebbe cenato a tavola con lei.

Dopo qualche settimana Natalina dovette lottare molto con se stessa per cedere ad un sentimento che le imponeva di fare un certo discorso alla signora; infine cominciò così:

« Io vorrei dirle molte cose ma non so mica far tanto bene. Quella vita non doveva durare, non poteva andare avanti così; ma ora io ho troppo e mi sento... per lei sento tanto bene ».

Marianna aveva dimostrata così apertamente e con una certa esuberanza la felicità che le dava il discorso di Natalina che la ragazza si rannicchiò tutta in se stessa quasi difendendosi. Fu comunque allora che la donna poté intravedere nel volto della fanciulla un qualche cosa che poteva somigliare ad un sorriso, ed era comunque un segno di remissione; Marianna ne seppe valutare tutto il valore e, da quel momento, divenne perfino più cauta nel dimostrare il proprio affetto. Fu quel giorno che essa concluse brevemente il primo dialogo che tanto aspettava dicendo che era Natalina a rendere un grande servizio a lei, così sola e non più del tutto giovane: « Non mi dare del lei, siamo amiche ».

In poco tempo Natalina divenne un aiuto valido nel negozio e nel

laboratorio di maglieria, imparò a trattare gli affari e Marianna, piano piano, lasciò che addirittura s'impossessasse di tutti gli elementi necessari e, quasi senza accorgersene, si trovasse ad esser lei a capo di tutto.

Quella sera, quando gli ospiti se ne furono andati, Marianna disse:

« Vorrei quasi che tu non partissi ».

« Non ti devi preoccupare, tornerò presto; debbo andare per vedere i vecchi ».

« Io starò qui ad aspettarti ». Natalina tacque un poco, poi, come continuando un ragionamento che faceva tra sé, aggiunse:

« I vecchi ormai hanno poco bisogno di me, quello che posso mandar loro basta perché mi senta tranquilla. Invece... » E rimase assorta.

« Invece? ».

« Invece, da quando sono qui, c'è una cosa che non dimentico. Io ho un obbligo, io devo fare qualche cosa ancora... ».

« Io speravo che tu avessi dimenticato. Mi sembra una cosa inutile; eppoi che te ne verrebbe da tutto ciò? ».

« Anche quando lo dicevo non pensavo a quello che ne sarebbe potuto venire a me e ai nonni ».

« Sei giovane, ma io non posso pretendere di saper tutto di te, sono però certa che mi consideri anche qualche cosa di più che una amica ». Natalina fece sì con la testa. « Ti raccomando di essere cauta, di pensar bene se vale la pena di preoccuparsi di tante cose ».

« Io non mi preoccupo, però debbo continuare ancora, lo devo, altrimenti avrò sempre qualche cosa dentro che mi fa star male ».

« Dove vai mai a trovare ragionamenti come questi. Io non so che dirti, promettimi almeno che mi scriverai, che mi terrai informata ».

« Io spero di tornare e di non pensare mai più a tutto questo, perché mi pesa ».

II

Le stagioni si erano susseguite ed un'altra primavera era tornata a smuovere tutti gli umori della terra. Il vecchio Casimiro aveva trascorso la maggior parte del tempo, dalla partenza della nipote, chiuso in cucina o seduto davanti alla porta sull'aia. I campi erano pressoché abbandonati, ma il denaro regolarmente inviato da Natalina, benché fosse poco, avanzava addirittura per le loro rudimentali necessità. Poi, per fortuna, era venuto Agostino; qualche mese avanti, sul finire dell'inverno, Agostino era venuto di domenica a far loro visita e aveva detto:

« Se volete, la domenica e quando ho qualche ora libera vengo a

darvi una mano: non voglio nulla; mi basta che lui non lo sappia». Il vecchio a sentir parlare di lui s'era irrigidito.

« Vattene, non voglio storie, ormai siamo vecchi, tra poco non ci saremo più ».

« Sono amico di vostra nipote io ».

Si erano messi d'accordo, Agostino si sarebbe preso qualche cosa del raccolto, ed almeno, se il podere non avrebbe reso gran che, sarebbe apparso un po' più curato.

« Che farà là sola, così lontana », si dicevano quando si vedevano. Qualche volta Casimiro raccontava alcuni brani delle lettere che Natalina inviava e che gli venivano lette dalla nuora; ma nessuno di loro capiva bene tutto quello che Natalina voleva dire ed il nonno finiva quasi sempre per commentare.

« Andare al servizio, io non ricordo che una Frateschi n'abbia mai avuto bisogno ».

Ma un giorno, con la solita lettera era arrivata anche una fotografia. « Quella è lei davvero », avevano detto le donne. « Ma è come una signora ». Ed avevano guardato per ore ed ore la fotografia, come se durassero fatica a decifrarla; in realtà facevano veramente fatica a vedere quella immagine, non capivano bene.

« Abbiamo perduto anche lei ». Questo fu l'unico commento di Casimiro.

« Ma che perduta! non senti che nella lettera dice che sta bene, che pensa spesso a noi ».

« Bah, la casa è andata a male, nelle lettere si dicono tante cose, ma questa io non la capisco ». Casimiro additava la fotografia.

« Ve lo dico io », spiegava allora Agostino. « Natalina, in casa di quella signora non fa mica la serva. Natalina ha studiato, quella signora è buona, io lo so; meglio per Natalina ».

« Se n'è andata », diceva il vecchio.

Ormai, Agostino, nelle domeniche e nelle ore in cui era sicuro di poter disporre del proprio tempo, correva alla casa dei Frateschi, lavorava quanto più poteva, poi scambiava qualche parola coi vecchi sui campi o su Natalina e ritornava in collina dondolandosi per la strada spoglio d'ogni pensiero.

III

Venturino non era più tornato regolarmente al bar di piazza Grande, ma non l'aveva nemmeno disertato del tutto; ogni tanto lo si vedeva seduto al solito posto, ed i commenti dei bottegai qualche volta si accanivano contro di lui senza che se ne rendesse troppo conto; ma anche se l'avesse saputo che quelli dicevano ladro, che dicevano cuore

di sasso, oppure anima nera, non se la sarebbe presa troppo a cuore, anzi era possibile che la cosa in sé lo riposasse. Aveva bisogno di riposare, da tempo si sentiva stanco, e non perché le membra giovanili, il sordo umor sanguigno che circolava violento nelle sue vene, dessero segni di depressione, ma perché quell'acuto sentimento di noia e di disprezzo che l'aveva sempre dominato guardandosi attorno non era più quello di una volta, ora s'era trovato, per mesi interi, ad andare di rado e controvoglia allo stabilimento, a trascorrere molte giornate in casa trascinandosi da una stanza all'altra, qualche volta insordito ed occupato solo a fumare qualche sigaro, oppure oppresso dalla vertiginosa fuga di pensieri alla fine dei quali si sentiva rabbioso contro se stesso.

Guardava ancora la città dal suo pertugio segreto, ma ormai anche quella era un'abitudine che si ripeteva quando si trovava seduto al caffè dove più nessuno veniva a fargli compagnia anche se coloro che lo salutavano con deferenza, passando di là, erano visibilmente aumentati assieme al suo prestigio che, con l'acquisto della villa, lo aveva innalzato nella considerazione di tutti i cittadini più di quanto non fossero riusciti tanti suoi affari da tutti commentati aspramente, ma da tutti invidiati cordialmente e senza troppi sottintesi.

Era come se in quell'anno nella mente di Venturino si fosse accumulato del buio. Nelle giornate più monotone soltanto i rintocchi della pendola, di volta in volta richiamavano nella sua memoria un flusso di vita che piombava dal passato nei modi più assurdi. Spesso, con quella specie di stanchezza mentale e quella salute prepotente e strabocchevole, sembrava risollevarsi un tantino pensando che anche l'ultimo legame al passato era stato spezzato con l'ultimo incontro con Marianna: questo pensiero gli dava la sensazione che i suoi atti di forza non fossero ancora finiti, che lui poteva essersi distaccato da ogni residuo del passato perché aveva ancora da vivere una vita, come se dovesse ancora costruirla giorno per giorno, all'incirca come aveva fatto nella sua giovinezza. Ma si trattava di un ripiego se, dopo, si sentiva ancora più vuoto e disinteressato ad intraprendere qualche cosa che l'occupasse e lo rendesse scattante come una volta.

Il giornale lo leggeva ancora interamente, lì trovava qualche volta di che scaldarsi il sangue; vi erano delle frasi che riuscivano a farlo scattare per un attimo: « Piccoli pezzenti! » gridava allora all'indirizzo dei grandi e dei piccoli, dei potenti e di tutti coloro che avevano ragioni per protestare.

IV

Agostino fu il primo a veder avanzare la ragazza dal fondo della strada. Aveva guardato troppo a lungo la fotografia sulla madia dei Frateschi per non riconoscerla subito; l'originale però, anche da lontano, lo mise in orgasmo ed il suo primo istinto fu quello di fuggire, ma non poté perché ormai era palesamente stato scorto da Natalina. Essa gli si avvicinò, la sua andatura era la stessa di un tempo, lui però tremava un poco: quando gli fu vicino lo salutò per prima, gli porse la mano ed egli la strinse dopo un lungo attimo di esitazione.

« Come sta Agostino? ».

« Io benissimo » rispose precipitosamente.

« Dovremo parlare un poco, poi; il mio nonno m'ha detto di lei. Ha fatto una cosa tanto buona e io non so ancora come dovrei dimostrare quanto ne sono contenta. Intanto grazie davvero, Agostino, grazie di tutto ».

Per Agostino fu un discorso oscuro; si strinse un poco nelle spalle e gli parve che forse lui avrebbe dovuto scusarsi di qualche cosa.

« Il padrone c'è? ».

« È uscito in macchina solo, ma non dovrebbe stare molto a tornare. Vuole proprio vederlo? ».

« Sono venuta per questo ». Il ragazzo la guardò sgomento allargando gli occhi, ma non articolò parola. « Era tempo che mi rifacessi viva. Lei come sta, sempre uguale? ».

« No, bene », rispose in fretta Agostino, e dopo un attimo di esitazione ripeté: « Vuole proprio vederlo? ».

« Certo ».

« Credevo che non la interessasse più. A che serve? ».

« Lei è proprio buono, ma io voglio proprio vederlo e mi metterò dentro ad aspettarlo ».

Natalina si mise a sedere su una poltrona davanti alla vetrata che dominava il giardino ed il viale d'ingresso e rimase immobile ad attendere. Le pareva che fossero trascorsi soltanto pochi giorni dalla sua ultima visita, ed involontariamente ragionava su una certa sensazione che le dava l'impressione che tutto ciò che era stato in mezzo, dal tempo del suo ultimo colloquio con Venturino, sparisse, od almeno perdesse ogni significato ed ogni efficacia. In verità però non bastava quella sensazione a cancellare un anno e mezzo così importante per lei; essa era lì nella medesima posizione in cui l'aveva atteso la prima volta nella vecchia casa di Borgo della Vittoria, ma qualche cosa di cambiato doveva pur esserci anche a non voler considerare il suo aspetto, il suo abito, ed un qualche cosa di diverso, di più disteso, sul suo volto chiaro.

Era arrivata due giorni avanti e si era intrattenuta coi vecchi. A

riambientarsi, anche provvisoriamente, tutto sommato aveva fatto fatica. Aveva faticato ad addormentarsi nel suo antico letto e, dinanzi ai nonni ed alla madre, l'aveva assalita come un senso di vergogna che aveva smorzato moltissimo la sicurezza con cui in passato si era mossi tra loro distaccata e padrona. Qualche cosa simile alla vergogna l'aveva resa inerte anche al pensiero di uscire di casa e di fare le strade a lei tanto note dove avrebbe, forse, incontrato tutti coloro che la conoscevano. Per quella ragione era infatti uscita soltanto quella mattina, molto presto; era andata in città, aveva perduto tempo, ed infine si era diretta alla villa, apparentemente con lo stesso passo di un tempo, con la medesima cocciuta sensazione di affrontare un nemico; ma al contrario di un tempo, questa volta c'era in lei qualche cosa di inconsapevolmente titubante.

« Abbiamo perduto anche lei », aveva detto il nonno appena rimasto solo con le donne: eppure l'aveva guardata ininterrottamente in quei due giorni, muto ma attento.

« Lei non poteva più vivere qui. È stato anche per il bene nostro, no? » aveva detto la madre; ma il vecchio aveva continuato a scuotere la testa stizzosamente.

Natalina si riscosse appena, quando la pendola suonò mezzogiorno e mezzo riprese la sua posizione e continuò a guardare fuori finché, dal cancello, non sbucò veloce la macchina di Venturino affrontando la salita; allora istintivamente scattò in piedi, con le braccia abbandonate lungo i fianchi, e rimase lì ad attendere, in quel momento, riacquistando la stessa serena e nel medesimo tempo tesa durezza delle volte passate.

Venturino entrò lentamente; era stato avvertito da Agostino e, già prima di entrare, aveva scorto dietro i vetri la figura della ragazza: fulmineamente aveva notato il piede calzato d'una semplice scarpa molto elegante e la calza di seta. L'onda dei capelli soffici e chiari era ancora la sua, se pur sulla sua testa la calotta d'oro si muoveva in un modo ben diverso da quello di un tempo.

Natalina sentì la porta che si apriva, ma prima di voltarsi attese un attimo. Si guardarono un poco senza parlare, l'immobilità del volto dell'una valeva quella dell'altro: mai si erano riconosciuti parenti come in quel momento e, nell'equilibrio dei loro ben diversi e forse opposti sentimenti, fu come un alone d'incertezza che poi si trasformò in una carica ancora indecisa ma vitale; sembrava che nella rigidità di quel confronto, si scambiassero segretamente un violento impulso di rivolta, di vita. Natalina non voleva parlare per prima, ma si sentì costretta dal silenzio di lui che sembrava non dovesse mai finire.

« Ve l'avevo detto che sarei tornata ». Venturino si mise a sedere

senza smettere di guardarla, poi con voce controllatissima si mise a parlare.

« Nel frattempo hai combinato qualche cosa d'interessante, a quanto pare ».

« Questo non interessa ».

« A me nulla. Ma ora non credo che vorrai più le mie mille lire e io non ho davvero nessuna voglia di risentire le vecchie storie. Mi annoiano: ti diedi un consiglio, vuoi che lo ripeta ».

« Non sono mai venuta per quello ».

« Ma le mille lire te le prendesti ».

« Non mi dispiace d'averle prese ».

« Sembrerebbe che tu non abbia orgoglio, ed invece... ».

« Forse orgogliosa non lo sono, ma non ha importanza ».

« Mettiti a sedere se vuoi ».

« Sono sempre rimasta in piedi in casa vostra. Ho parlato in piedi ».

« Il tuo parlare, lo sai, ormai lo conosco a memoria. Facciamone a meno, non ne ho nessuna voglia ».

« Io sono venuta per parlare ».

« Già, tu vieni per parlare. È una fissazione che ti devi togliere perché anche se a te piace a me non garba ».

« Cercate di essere paziente e state calmo, io vi voglio parlare ».

« Ma se le conosco a memoria le tue chiacchiere e son tutte cose che non mi riguardano e, quant'è vero Dio, non le ascolterò più ».

« Io, oggi, non credo di esser venuta a chiedere le solite cose di prima, ma son voluta venire per lo stesso scopo di prima ».

« Il tuo scopo bravo sarebbe chi lo capisce. A giudicare dall'apparenza, le necessità degli altri anni non debbono più essere così pressanti. Anzi, dovrei farti dei complimenti perché, via, devi proprio averci saputo fare ».

« Non parlate così, credo che sia piuttosto poco bello quello che pensate, ma non fa nulla. Io ho pensato molto a quello che siete e, ve lo dico subito, non posso credere che si possa essere quello che sembrate, non è possibile ».

Venturino era rimasto molto calmo, almeno in apparenza, ma lievemente la sua fronte si faceva più rosea; la ragazza che aveva imparato a conoscerlo, fino a quel momento era rimasta come in attesa, soddisfatta del modo con cui si svolgeva quel colloquio; ma quando poté notare assieme a quel lieve rossore, una ancor più lieve alterazione della voce, si rivolse di nuovo a lui quasi con sollievo, pur rimanendo immobile ed indecifrabile nella sua solita candida durezza.

« Tu lo sai bene che cosa è possibile; l'ultima volta l'hai visto. Che vieni cercando. Che cosa vuoi da me ».

« Vorrei, come l'anno passato, dirvi che dovete pensare a tante co-

se, che non si può essere come voi, non ricordarsi di nulla, non temere; non si può essere così cattivi ».

« Se lo fosse che cosa può importare a te. In ogni modo che vuoi saperne di me, che cosa ti credi di essere? ».

« Nulla magari, ma questo ve lo devo dire ».

« Insomma vuoi venire a difendere le cause dei poveri vecchi abbandonati; è questa la storia no? vuoi parlarmi dei miei doveri. Io non ho doveri e con questo ho detto tutto, te ne puoi anche andare, se ora sei più ragionevole d'un tempo ».

« Di quei vostri doveri ora ne potete fare anche a meno, non ce n'è più bisogno; non sono venuta per questo, ve l'ho detto ».

« Ma allora che vuoi? ».

« Io ho pensato tanto che la vostra anima sembra un nido di serpenti, ma io credo che non sia possibile essere davvero così. L'ho pensato tanto e ve lo devo dire ».

« Che cosa sai tu, che c'entri. Per chi mi prendi, ragazza. Forse ti credi che queste parole servano. A che debbono servire poi; se non mi annoiassero mi divertirei; ora però basta, vattene perché veramente, anche se mi piacesse perdere così il tempo, cominci di nuovo a farmi perdere la calma ».

« Si sa che la perderete ».

« Ti metterò fuori in qualche modo che ti ricorderai per un pezzo, più lungo di quello che è passato ».

« Lo farete certamente; ma io, anche me ne andassi ora, tornerei, perché ci penso a quello che siete, continuerò a pensarci e tornerò di nuovo, perché quando ci penso mi fa paura un uomo come voi, allora io mi convinco sempre che non può essere che uno sia veramente così ».

« Dove vuoi arrivare ». Questa volta Venturino sembrò quasi disperato. « Sapessi che cosa vuoi, saprei almeno perché mi irriti tanto. Se lo sapessi ti caccerei con più soddissfazione ».

« Che mi cacciate a me non interessa se riesco a parlare con voi e le mie parole restano un poco in mente ».

« Le tue parole mi mettono voglia di fare qualche cosa che ti faccia vedere davvero com'è fatta un'anima piena di vipere. Sei tu che metti una vipera in seno alla gente, se non mi sbaglio, ma con me è un'altra cosa, cerca di capirlo fin che sei in tempo ».

« Ma non avete paura di quello che fate? non si può essere così ».

« Cosa vuoi mettermi in testa. Vedi, posso parlare ancora con calma, ma quello che mi esaspera se non mi lasci in pace è, se non mi sbaglio, un certo veleno che nelle tue parole ci deve essere davvero. Vattene sai, vattene ora che sono ancora calmo ».

In verità quella che lui chiamava ancora calma era una rabbia, un'ira che s'accendeva sotterranea e raggrumava tutti i tratti del suo

olto che avrebbe fatto indietreggiare molti che lo conoscevano; ma Natalina, nella immobile rigida grazia a cui rispondeva l'inalterabile celata fissità del suo volto, rimase lì a guardare l'uomo che ora si era alzato e, mentre si muoveva verso di lei, essa finiva per dare l'impressione di offrirsi alla sua furia se fosse esplosa rozza e irresponsabile come le altre volte. Venturino si muoveva nervosamente ma taceva, allora la ragazza disse:

« Il veleno voi l'avete in voi stesso, Venturino, v'accecherà, vi inossicherà. C'è il male, la pazzia, che vi finiranno; eppure sarebbe facile che voi capiste finché siete in tempo ».

« Che cosa vuoi ficcarmi in testa; questo è un veleno; il veleno più pericoloso sei tu, se io capisco bene. A che miri non lo so, ma se vuoi proprio intossicarmi dentro, prima che tu ci riesca, ecco, io ti spacco questa piccola testolina ». Si era avvicinato a lei minaccioso.

« Io non temo queste cose perché credo a quello che vi dico e vorrei avere le parole giuste per dirvelo tante volte finché non capiste ».

« Capire che cosa! capire che cosa! » si mise a gridare Venturino.

« Io credo che potreste accorgervi di tutto il male... ».

« Credi in questo intanto », e diede uno schiaffo alla ragazza, non tanto violento, questa volta, quanto sonoro e provocante. Avrebbe voluto spingerla fuori brutalmente, s'accinse a farlo, ma invece le serrò le spalle tra le mani con tutta la furia che gli s'accendeva sul volto; un attimo dopo, con un frenetico turbamento improvviso, prima di spingerla brutalmente fuori la strinse a sé, serrandola tra le braccia.

In quell'attimo la porta del corridoio s'aprì di schianto: come un animale infuriato, a testa bassa, entrò Agostino che si buttò sul pavimento con le braccia alzate. Venturino si difese in un baleno, lo stese a terra con un pugno e, afferrato un vaso di ceramica, gli fu sopra picchiando sulla testa del ragazzo con un colpo orribile e cieco. La faccia del ragazzo fu inondata di sangue e si vide allora Venturino che, alzatosi in piedi, con la bocca spalancata, gridò con una voce raggeata: « Il sangue! » poi si accasciò svenuto sul pavimento accanto all'altro.

Accorse la cameriera, ed assieme a Natalina che era rimasta immobile, con le braccia inerti, dinnanzi a tutta la scena, si chinò su Agostino il quale riprendeva i sensi: aveva un taglio profondo sulla fronte dal quale usciva il sangue fino a disperdersi sul pavimento. Le due donne erano ancora in quella posizione quando la porta a vetri si aprì ed un uomo male in arnese si presentò accigliato, si fermò sulla soglia, stette un attimo a guardare la scena, poi si avvicinò chiedendo: « Che succede? vi aiuto ». Trasportarono Agostino nella sua cameretta poi egli disse: « Vado a vedere che cosa succede a Venturino. Sono un suo amico ». E si presentò a Natalina: « Scusi, Lorenzo Giaccai ».

V

Venturino si era ripreso e stava alzandosi da solo di sul pavimento; per prima cosa vide di nuovo la macchia di sangue e non potè frenare un breve gemito di raccapriccio. Riacquistando immediatamente tutta la scattante facoltà delle sue forze balzò lontano verso l'angolo opposto della stanza tenendo la testa inclinata nel timore di rivedere quella macchia rossa che l'aveva così turbato. Quasi disteso sul divano stava cercando di riordinare le idee quando scorse un uomo che gli si avvicinava a passo lento e dondolante; era vestito miseramente e lo guardava con volto sprezzante ed acuto.

« Mi riconosci? »

Venturino guardava l'estraneo come se non capisse; quella specie di torbido timore che ogni tanto in quell'ultimo anno lo aveva attanagliato, sembrava esser risorto tutto assieme alla vista della chiazza di sangue, ed ora andava associandosi all'apparizione di quella figura che gli si avvicinava con lo sguardo sottile.

« Ti sei sentito male? Che stai combinando ».

« Certo mi hai dimenticato, sono i maestri che si dimenticano per i primi. Il Professore, ti ricordi? »

In quell'istante Venturino dimenticò il suo malore, si spogliò d'ogni agitazione che l'aveva reso inerte per un poco e si pose a sedere sul divano.

« Tu che ci fai qui? »

« Passavo, io non dimentico gli amici ».

« Che cosa vuoi, che hai visto? »

« Ho visto un bel po' di confusione ».

« C'era una ragazza ».

« C'era tanta gente, sono di là, curano quel contadino ». Il Giacca tacque un poco aspettando, ma tutt'un tratto disse, credendo di capire: « Ah, è per lei! complimenti ».

Ora, qualche cosa aveva fatto breccia nell'animo di Venturino. Si ricompose e chiese calmo:

« Sei venuto qui per dire delle scempiaggini da quattro soldi? Vattene ». Fece per alzarsi, ma in fondo alla stanza scorse Natalina che lo osservava immobile. Rimasero un attimo a guardarsi in quel modo poi la fanciulla si voltò e uscì.

« Chi è, bella », fece il Giacca.

« Che cosa c'entri tu, da dove vieni ».

« Da lontano, ho bisogno di parlare un minuto con te; lo vedo, una cattiva giornata, ma io ho fretta ».

« Ora lasciami in pace, vai in paese, dove vuoi, ti verrò a trovare ma ora lasciami solo ».

« Non posso andare in paese ».

« Vai ti dico. Vai all'albergo, pagherò io ma esci di qui ».

« Non posso t'ho detto, devi trovarmi un posto qui per oggi, poi parleremo ».

« Qui no ».

« Qui sì, mio caro, per forza ».

Venturino sembrò stessee per ribellarsi malamente; ma si riprese immediatamente ed aggiunse.

« Vai all'osteria di Fontananova, di che ti mando io, ti raggiungerò là, stasera ».

« T'aspetto là ». S'infilò un berretto da operaio ed uscì a passi lunghi e lenti. In quel momento suonarono le tre; Venturino chiuse gli occhi ed un pensiero gli attraversò la mente. — Marianna, il Giaccai, non si conoscono nemmeno. — Ancora non aveva finito di formulare quel pensiero che si mise a gridare, di nuovo forte, padrone.

« Non c'è nessuno qui. Dove siete, che ci fate in questa casa! » la cameriera apparve sulla soglia.

« Che succede qui ».

« Mah, signor Venturino, a lui stanno ricucendo la testa, dice che è caduto ».

« Caduto, caduto », fece Venturino come a confermare. Subito dopo uscì nel giardino, girò attorno alla villa, salì alcuni ripiani dello scasso della vigna e si fermò a guardare Pescia, la campagna, la strada che s'inoltrava tra i colli verso Firenze. Un ordine quasi feroce regnava su quei campi, una dominazione del lavoro secolare, cocciuto, rigidamente conservato dal ripetersi delle opere. Venturino si fermò a lungo a guardare i tetti della piccola città, poi, prima di tornarsene indietro bisbigliò, quasi come una imprecazione: « Un buco! ».

VI

La gioia che traspariva dai volti del Nini, del Passeretti e di Gino Taddeucci, riuniti ad un tavolo ad ascoltare il Giaccai che raccontava qualche cosa sulla Tunisia, poteva ben essere quella che palesava la soddisfazione dei vecchi compagni nell'incontrare dopo tanti anni un amico e rivivere con lui l'aura dei tempi migliori, quelli della giovinezza, quando la vita era più facile e le piccole cose sembravano atti di spavalderia e di coraggio fuor del comune, perché non c'erano ancora state le guerre ad insegnare fino a che punto il male può sconvolgere la vita dei paesi; ma Venturino, entrando inosservato, appena vide quei volti attenti e sorridenti pensò qualche cosa di diverso: — Guardali come sono contenti di vederlo in malarnese come loro, quelle sono le loro soddisfazioni, poveri diavoli. —

Quando si accorsero di lui tacquero tutti, anche il Giaccai si azzittì.

Venturino andò a sedersi ad un tavolo discosto, pur salutando cordialmente e, dopo aver detto agli altri: « Bevete », fece segno al Giaccai di venirgli vicino; i vecchi amici capirono che loro avevano da parlare per conto proprio.

« Stai meglio? » chiese il Giaccai sedendoglisi vicino.

« Meglio di che? »

« Dicevo così... sai, sono contento di rivederti qui, pensa, nemmeno farlo apposta, rincontrarsi qui ».

« Già, proprio qui ».

« Io ho sempre pensato a te da quando mi lasciasti ».

« Io non ho avuto tempo di pensare. Dimmi piuttosto che ci fa da queste parti e che cosa vuoi ».

« Senti, in questo paese di gentetta potrai arricciare il naso quanto vuoi, ma con me non è il caso e tu dovresti essere il primo a saperlo ».

« Parla d'altro ».

« Potrai seccarti quanto vuoi, ma avrai torto; non si può dimenticare le persone alle quali si deve pur qualche cosa. Ricordati chi era quando ci siamo conosciuti ».

« Questo discorso non è necessario, io ho una memoria anche troppo buona ».

« Certo a quel tempo il sangue bolliva, ma non ti credere, sono in forma anche oggi, un momento difficile, ecco tutto. Nei momenti difficili solo chi ha seminato può raccogliere ».

« Soldi allora? »

« Non lo dire così in fretta, però mi serve un aiuto, certo ».

Venturino sembrò indifferente, ma in realtà si sentì sollevato.

« Tu mi insegnasti tante cose, ma dopo ne ho imparate ben altre: oggi posso insegnartene io, se vuoi ».

« Non voglio imparare nulla e non mi giudicare dall'aspetto, lo sai che il mondo lo conosco bene, io ».

« Ma insomma di dove vieni? ».

« Da tanti luoghi, ma ora debbo tornare in Francia, là ho i miei interessi. Posso tornarci soltanto per una strada lunga, capisci? un po' costosa. Ho avuto qualche guaio, ma una volta a casa tutto va a posto: per te non sarà molto, poi ti farò riavere tutto ».

« Non voglio saper altro. Denaro, certo che te ne darò, anche volendo non mi sentirei di rifiutartene ».

« Non potresti davvero. Dovrai anche ospitarmi per questa notte ».

« No, resterai qui, ti porterò qui quello che ti occorre ».

« Qui non le hanno più le camere come una volta, mi sono già informato, ed in albergo non posso andare, non mi conviene ».

« Non voglio saper nulla, ma domani è meglio che tu te ne vada ».

« Certo, di primo mattino, che vuoi che ci faccia qui ».

« Bene, beviamo. Chiama anche gli altri ».

« Sapevo che potevo contare su di te ».

Si riunirono con gli altri e bevvero fino a tardi mentre in un angolo del locale qualcuno cantava; si cantava spesso, da sempre, all'osteria di Fontananova. Vi fu un momento di allegria, poi tutti sembrarono stanchi ed allora Venturino caricò il Giaccai sulla macchina e condusse alla villa.

« Ti darò il denaro, ti darò una coperta, dormirai un poco giù, pian terreno, e domattina te ne vai ».

« È così che voglio fare. Troverò poi un'occasione per farti riavere denaro ».

« Non c'è bisogno, l'importante è salutarci, perché io ora non ho voglia di veder più nessuno e preferisco ricordarti lontano. Vivo in un altro modo ora ».

« Proprio nessuno vuoi vedere? »

« Che vuoi dire? »

« Chi è quella ragazza, l'ho vista un momento, ma me la ricordo bene ».

« Non ti riguarda, lascia correre », concluse Venturino duramente, poi condusse il Giaccai nello studio, trasse da un cassetto un cofanetto di metallo da dove tolse un grosso pacchetto di denaro che stava lì assieme a tant'altro e lo porse all'amico. Richiuse il cofanetto, chiuse il cassetto, poi chiuse anche la porta dello studio. Procurò una coperta al Giaccai, gli additò un divano, gli insegnò come sarebbe potuto uscire al mattino e si salutarono.

« Sei stato un vero amico, generoso come un vero signore. Grazie Venturino, non me lo dimenticherò ». Venturino sorrise e gli parve quasi d'udire una certa vibrazione affettuosa nella voce del suo antico maestro.

« Buonanotte ».

VII

Prima dell'alba Venturino si trovò sveglio e teso ad ascoltare un lieve rumore che proveniva dalla stanza sotto la sua camera. Non era stato il rumore a svegliarlo, non sarebbe stato proprio possibile perché si trattava di qualche cosa che lui aveva udito soltanto perché l'aveva voluto udire, perché s'era svegliato apposta per udirlo, quasi che dentro di lui vi fosse sotto la coscienza una vigile attesa, una certezza che quel rumore sarebbe giunto. Non dubitò nemmeno un attimo, fu certo che si trattava del Giaccai che trafficava nel suo studio. Con la prontezza dei suoi momenti migliori fu in piedi, scese veloce le scale senza far rumore calzato d'un paio di ciabatte imbottite. La porta dello studio era aperta con la maniglia distorta, la lampada sulla sua scrivania accesa e, dietro, acquattato, il Professore si dava da fare.

Venturino si avvicinò inavvertito, sentì l'uomo che mentre armeggiava attorno al cassetto brontolava tra sé imprecando tra i denti; mai gli era sopra e la cosa quasi lo divertiva.

« Bestemmia pure più forte ora ».

Aveva un aspetto comico la faccia del Giaccai che sorse lentamente da dietro la scrivania, sembrava più sorpreso che spaventato. Comunque, trovandosi Venturino quasi sopra lui, indietreggiò rapidamente, facendo un gesto di sconforto col quale voleva anche dire che non aveva proprio nulla da aggiungere, tutto era più che chiaro.

« Sei divenuto peggiore di quello che avrei immaginato ».

« Che cosa vuoi che ti dica. Non dovevi farti vedere, io attraverso un momento difficile e la tua cassetta è piena di soldi ».

« Già ».

« Comunque hai poco da dire, noi ci conosciamo abbastanza; lasciamo le cose come stanno e io me ne vado subito ».

« Te ne andrai quando ti faccio passare di qui ».

« Certo che mi lascerai passare, e senza farmi la predica, non sei tu che puoi farmi una predica. Rubavo, non ci sono riuscito, ecco tutto. Contentati di saperlo ».

« Piccolo miserabile da quattro soldi, ladruncolo che si lascia prendere con le mani nel sacco. Faresti meglio ad andare a rubar galline per i pollai. Il denaro te lo avevo dato, senza contarlo troppo, mi pare ».

« Se c'è uno che con me non ha diritto di prendere questo tonfo sei proprio tu ».

« Forse ti credi di parlare con un tuo pari, ma io ti farò cambiare idea ».

« Lasciami andare e smetti di guardarmi, non è davanti a te che mi vergognerò. Tu credi d'essere meno miserabile di me perché sei ricco? ».

« Io non credo, sono, meno miserabile di te ». Venturino gli si avvicinò lentamente costringendolo ad appoggiare le spalle ad uno scaffale di libri; si sentiva forte, superiore, felice. Lo prese per il collo della giacca dicendo: « Ora uscirai, sì, ma a calci, ti metterò fuori come un cane ».

« Non mi toccare! ».

Venturino alzò una mano per abatterla sulla sua faccia, ma l'altro si difese, aveva in mano un arnese di metallo col quale aveva cercato di forzare il cassetto e con quello vibrò un colpo tra il collo e la spalla e, libero, fuggì, sparì non appena fuori nella nebbia del mattino.

Venturino non aveva affatto perduto i sensi, ma il dolore era stato atroce; si trascinò nel corridoio, risalì in camera sua e suonò il campanello. Il dolore non lo scomponeva, ma quando vide la giacca depigiata intrisa di sangue cominciò a soffrire d'un male che lo abbatté più della ferita.

Il medico giunse tre quarti d'ora dopo, insonnolito e sbalordito: poche ore era la seconda volta che lo chiamavano alla villa per curare due feriti.

« La sua è una cosa seria ».

« Non mi sento bene dottore, ma è il sangue che mi dà la nausea ».

« Io penso che non si sentirà bene per un po'. Ha detto che è stato ladro, bisognerà avvertire i carabinieri allora ».

« Non voglio, dottore ».

« Ma è obbligatorio; due ferite nello stesso giorno poi, capirà ».

« Senta dottore, lei mi curerà ed io lo pagherò bene, il suo dovere quello di curarmi, il mio di compensarla. Per il resto faccia come chiedo io ».

« Ma io non voglio noie ».

« Con me non ne avrà. Lei avrà solo benefici, le noie le ho già viste io ».

Il medico lasciò la casa molto tardi. Conosceva bene Venturino ed era più che disposto a fare come voleva lui. Quando se ne fu andato, Venturino chiamò la cameriera, anche a lei impose il silenzio poi chiese: « Il ragazzo, come sta? ».

« Nulla di grave, lui ».

« Me l'ha detto anche il dottore ».

« Gli rimarrà un segno sulla fronte e nient'altro ».

VIII

Con la testa fasciata, disteso sul suo letto, Agostino aveva passata tutta la sera avanti e tutta quella mattina con gli occhi fissi sulla porta della sua stanzetta; ogni volta che era entrata la cameriera aveva tolto le mani di sotto la coperta, poi le aveva rimesse sotto vedendo che era lei. Alla donna non aveva chiesto nulla, alle sue domande non aveva risposto; essa aveva ben capito una sola cosa della testa rotta di Agostino, che era successa una delle solite scene tra il padrone e il ragazzo. Più tardi però, portandogli qualche cosa da mangiare, gli aveva raccontato molto confusamente della ferita del padrone che ora si trovava sul letto ed Agostino, a quel discorso, invece di sentirsi più tranquillo, fu preso da una segreta agitazione; si rannicchiò ancor più nel suo lettuccio e rimase lì, benché si rendesse perfettamente conto che la sua ferita gli avrebbe permesso di alzarsi e di muoversi liberamente.

Il pomeriggio tornò di nuovo il dottore per Venturino il quale, verso sera, cominciò a sentirsi più debole, fu scosso dai brividi della febbre, ed anche lui che fino ad allora era rimasto tutto sostenuto, teso e nervosamente per non sentirsi sopraffare dal male, finì per lasciarsi

scivolare sotto le coltri. In realtà più che dal male gli sembrava di essere oppresso da un sentimento di solitudine che nasceva dall'immobilità in cui era costretto: ogni cinque minuti aveva chiamato la cameriera per inutili motivi, l'aveva trattata malamente, ed infine, quando ormai era già quasi notte ed il medico aveva fatto la sua terza visita, disse: « Dica ad Agostino di venire qui, se può ».

Udito l'ordine del padrone Agostino balzò dal letto, si vestì in fretta alla meglio e corse sopra: più era spaventato di quella chiamata più s'ingegnava di ubbidire in fretta.

« Tu dovresti rimanere qui. Il dottore m'ha detto che la tua ferita non è grave ».

« Sto qui padrone ». Docile, si mise a sedere in una poltrona accanto al letto. Si rendeva conto che non aveva nulla da temere, ma ciò lo inquietava assai di più invece che rincuorarlo. Venturino ora era palesemente abbattuto dal dolore e dalla febbre; ma non smetteva di parlare. Il ragazzo ogni volta che si sentiva osservato vagava inutilmente con lo sguardo sulla parete che gli stava davanti.

« Sei stato una canaglia », gli aveva detto in principio Venturino e questa prima frase, benché fosse stata detta senza nessuna foga, aveva servito a calmare un poco l'agitazione del ragazzo. « Perché vuoi difendere quella là », aveva poi chiesto.

« Mi dispiaceva padrone ».

« Cosa ti dispiaceva ».

« Che voi le facessite del male ».

« Sei come un cane da guardia ».

Sì, sì, aveva fatto Agostino scuotendo la testa.

« Ma perché ti dispiaceva? ». Il ragazzo non accennava a rispondere. Allora il padrone chiese di nuovo:

« Perché? ».

« Perché fa male vedere cose come quelle ».

« Sentilo! e dov'è che ti fa male, spiegati. Ti piace vero? la notte pensi a lei: è bella, ma per quella chi sa che cosa ci vuole, altro che te! ».

« Padrone, quella è tanto buona che nessuno lo sa quanto ».

« Oppure è una canaglia con un cervello fine come non ti potrai mai immaginare. Che vuoi sapere tu di queste cose ».

« Queste cose si sanno; lo possono sapere tutti quando uno è buono davvero ».

« Ma dimmi un po', come avrà fatto a vestirsi così. Dov'è stato tutto questo tempo, ne sai qualche cosa? ».

Il ragazzo tacque come se non avesse udito.

« Allora sai davvero qualche cosa. Stai a vedere che anche tu sei più furbo di quanto sembra. Parla, butta fuori quello che sai perché con me non si può fare il furbo, vero? ».

« È andata in una città lontana, con la signora Marianna; partirono assieme quando la signora lasciò la villa ».

Venturino, benché non potesse muoversi sussultò nel letto, poi gemé per la ferita ed infine tacque a lungo. Nella casa era silenzio, il ragazzo rimase immobile, in attesa; avrebbe voluto non aver raccontato quella cosa, ma sapeva che tutto quanto gli fosse stato chiesto da Venturino egli l'avrebbe detto. — È una rete, una trama fitta che si annoda maglia per maglia — aveva pensato Venturino; poi era rimasto a lungo in silenzio ascoltando le ore e le mezze ore che, in quel silenzio, si udivano battere anche da su. Infine tutt'un tratto egli disse ad alta voce:

« Che strano ».

Agostino era rimasto fermo come un oggetto, a quella parola assestata e premurosa.

« Perché dici di sì ».

« Perché avete parlato. Non lo so perché ».

« Sei un povero straccetto anche tu... non dire di sì ancora ». Allora Agostino fece no, no, con la testa.

« Se tu mi avessi fatto del male ieri ti avrei spezzato in due », disse improvvisamente, ed il ragazzo affondò la testa nelle spalle con un gesto penoso. « Venirmi incontro in quel modo. Del resto ci hai rimesso tu. Ti fa male la ferita? ».

« No padrone, male non fa ».

« E quella è più tornata? ».

« Vista non l'ho più vista, io ».

« Avrei giurato che oggi si faceva viva; ha un fiuto, quella, nello scegliere i suoi momenti! Per fortuna questa volta ci ha lasciato in pace ».

« Ma vedrete che tornerà, padrone ».

« E come ha saputo scegliersi chi l'avrebbe tolta dai guai. Quanto è buffo il mondo, una cosa dietro l'altra, sembra che succedano a caso invece tutto dev'esser legato ». Agostino lo stava ad ascoltare con gli occhi spalancati pur seguendolo a stento. Quando poi si azzittì, dopo un poco il ragazzo chiese, quasi confidenzialmente.

« Avete avuto paura ».

« Paura di che, debbo aver paura di qualche cosa io? ».

« Del ladro, dicevo ».

« Ah, di lui no, se avessi avuto paura non mi avrebbe ferito perché sarei stato attento. Io, paura, di che cosa vuoi che l'abbia. Dillo se posso aver paura di qualche cosa ».

« Voi no, signor Venturino ».

« E tu di che hai paura ». Il ragazzo sembrò allarmato di questa domanda. « Dillo, di che hai paura ».

« Io? mah, di tante cose. Certe giornate ho sempre paura ».

« Molto di me, vero ».

Agostino rimase un attimo perplesso, poi scosse la testa affermando vamente.

« Perché allora l'altro giorno non hai avuto paura? ».

« Non me ne sono accorto », rispose prontamente.

« Forse non sai davvero che cosa dovresti dire. Volevi difenderla; vero? A quanto pare lei li trova facilmente i suoi difensori; chi sa perché ».

« Perché è buona ».

« Che ne sai tu, stupido; che cosa vuoi capire. Forse quella è più pericolosa di chiunque altro, c'è da stare attenti con quella ». Venturino era stanco, si sentiva rosso dalla febbre ma temeva il silenzio e parlava; faceva fatica ma continuava a parlare.

« Perché dici che è buona? ».

« Io non lo so signor Venturino; voi però le dovrete sapere queste cose ».

« Allora che parli a fare ».

« Lo dico perché si vede ».

« Si vede? questa è bella. Non sai nemmeno quello che dici ».

« Quello che dico lo so signor Venturino ».

« Ma sì, se ti contenti ». Ogni tanto Venturino taceva ed allora il ragazzo rimaneva lì, disponibile, perduto nella sua spenta e pur solida vitalità.

« Io me la caverò presto e allora metteremo a posto tutte le cose. È nato del disordine qui attorno, c'è confusione in questa casa. Ordine bisogna fare ». Il ragazzo assentì premurosamente. « Che capisci che vuoi mai capire. Lo so io, è nata della confusione, ce n'è da per tutto, entra nelle ossa, entra dentro; ma ci penserò io perché io voglio essere tranquillo »

« Se non lo siete voi ».

« Che vuoi dire? ».

« A voi non manca nulla, siete ricco, siete padrone ».

« Già, già », concluse vagamente Venturino ed i loro occhi questa volta si incontrarono. Agostino allora si accorse che il padrone doveva stare assai male; il suo volto sembrava rimpiccolito, rappreso in una smorfia di dolore, e con una premura goffa e spontanea disse:

« Ma voi vi sentite male ».

« Chi sa che male debbo sentire. E tu, la tua testa? ».

« Il mio è passato, voi di che avete bisogno? ».

« Stai qui anche se non parlo più, anche se m'addormento, capito? ».

« Sì ».

Mezz'ora dopo dormiva e la sua fronte era bagnata di sudore. Il ragazzo rimase a guardarlo fissamente mentre la lunga notte si consumava lenta.

L'alba pigra di quella giornata di tardo autunno si fece strada

anche nella camera, riducendo pian piano ad una malinconica luminescenza rossa la luce della lampada che era rimasta sempre accesa. Venturino si svegliò improvvisamente, aprì gli occhi e si trovò davanti il volto di Agostino che lo fissava mestamente immobile.

« Io sono qui, padrone ».

« Lo vedo anche da me. Che ore sono? ».

« Ho sentito che giù si sono alzati da poco ».

Il medico non tardò molto, trafficò a lungo straziando la ferita di Venturino, poi diede un'occhiata alla testa di Agostino che non aveva bisogno di cure speciali fintanto che non fosse venuto il momento di togliere i punti. Era il miglior medico della città, di buona esperienza, come finiscono per esserlo i medici dei piccoli centri che affinano sul lavoro, senza mai restringersi nei limiti di una specializzazione. Quando se ne fu andato, Venturino, rivolto al ragazzo, disse:

« Tu fai qui colazione, resti qui ». Nel dir questo fece una smorfia che poteva somigliare in qualche modo ad un sorriso: non ricordava d'aver sorriso, chi sa da quanto.

IX

Natalina non ricordava d'aver mai pianto, nemmeno da bambina, nemmeno ricordava d'aver veduto piangere qualcuno, se non gli umidori degli occhi di Marianna ogni qualvolta lei riusciva ad accennare qualche gesto o qualche frase affettuosa.

Non aveva mai pianto e non aveva mai avuta occasione nemmeno di pensarlo durante la sua esistenza, fino a quella notte, quando, tornata alla villa dove era andata ad informarsi della salute di Agostino e dove aveva appreso anche l'altra avventura di suo zio, dopo essersi intrattenuta nel solito quasi muto scrutarsi tra lei ed i vecchi, salita nella sua camera, al buio, si era messa in ginocchio ai piedi del suo letto come in altri tempi. La sua era un'abitudine che le avevano data le monache dalle quali aveva studiato, ma non pregava come esse le avevano insegnato, fin dai tempi in cui aveva lasciata la scuola aveva smesso di ripetere le parole insegnatele; quel gesto era per lei una specie di abbandono in cui, dopo poco, sentiva smarrire tutte le inconsapevoli angosce accumulate durante la giornata e si trovava calma, sorretta da un'onda di vita che sembrava ricondurla ad un ritmo placido, una navigazione serena nel buio della notte e nel buio dei suoi pensieri di fronte alla sua esistenza ed al futuro. Quella sera, come sempre, mentre era rimasta calma e strenuamente controllata dinanzi a tutto ciò che era avvenuto, già per la strada s'era sentita come vacillare in quella sua tensione, ed ora, poteva abbandonarsi;

ma non ritrovò la distensione antica così subitanea: lei rammentò subito allora il sangue sul pavimento ed un brivido, anziché come un tempo ad annullare ogni suo pensiero, la condusse a ricostruire con estrema sofferenza tutto ciò che aveva visto e provato in quella giornata. C'è un senso aveva quello che stava facendo, forse era lei la vera responsabile di tutto quanto era accaduto, che voleva lei così respinta, odiata. Pensò che forse aveva portato un male maggiore dove già il male regnava, ed in quel momento un singhiozzo le serrò la gola e due lacrime rapide e lunghe le scesero sul viso, si sentì ferita e si accasciò sul letto piangendo silenziosamente.

Quando poté riordinare le idee si sentì però finalmente calma e distesa: io so quello che voglio, fu il primo pensiero che le attraversò la mente e la rese quasi felice, la condusse verso il sonno pacificato e sicuro.

Quando, la mattina, dopo essere stata in città a far delle piccole spese per la casa dei nonni tornò alla villa, la cameriera la informò che Venturino ed Agostino stavano assieme.

« Stanno assieme in camera sua? ».

« Da ieri sera ».

« Non mi dispiacerebbe salire, se fosse possibile ».

« Io non lo so ».

« Vada a domandare per favore ».

Natalina rimase ad attendere in fondo alla scala con le braccia abbandonate.

« Ha detto che lei qui è sempre entrata ed uscita senza domandare il permesso a nessuno », riferì la donna discendendo. Natalina salì le scale lentamente, quasi di malavoglia, quel giorno pareva non trovasse la sicurezza segretamente quasi proterva con la quale sempre si era diretta ad affrontare lo zio.

Venturino ed Agostino eran rimasti con gli occhi fissi sulla porta ignorandosi a vicenda. Entrò piano nella camera, si fermò in mezzo guardando prima l'uno e poi l'altro, e fu Venturino che parlò per primo.

« Volevo ben dire, mancavi tu eppoi tutto è in regola ».

« Non temete me ne andrò subito, non è buon momento questo per vederci ».

« Non l'hai mai detto, prima. Credevo proprio il contrario, per te che sei fissata ».

« Quello che avevo da dirvi ora, ce l'hanno detto addirittura le cose che sono successe, se avete un po' d'intelletto per intendere ».

« Oh! ora avresti addirittura finito di parlare? bene! proprio ora che potresti costringermi ad ascoltarti anche per una giornata senza che io ci potessi far nulla. Non vedi che non mi posso muovere ».

« Me ne andrò subito ».

« Lasciamo perdere tutte queste sciocchezze. Te ne andrai, ma prima lascerai che le dica io due paroline ».

« Non state bene ».

« Sto bene quanto basta per dirti tutto quello che voglio ».

« Se lo volete ».

« Si fa presto. Prima di tutto debbo congratularmi con te. Sappi, che vieni qua a far la santa e chi sa che altra diavoleria, che il modo che tu hai scelto per cavarti d'impaccio è proprio lo stesso che scelsi io; nemmeno a farlo apposta. Non c'è alcuna differenza, te lo assicuro, ed è inutile che tu venga qui a far la paladina, ora so tutto e tra me e te non c'è da far differenza né da sottilizzare troppo. Ora l'hai trovata chi ti rimette a nuovo a buon mercato ed è proprio utile che tu continui a ronzare da queste parti. Vattene e non ti fare più vedere, mi sentirò liberato come d'un pericolo, sì, proprio come a un pericolo ».

« Voi potete dire quello che volete, potete anche sforzarvi di pensarlo, ma lo sapete bene, lo sentite che non è così, che non basta arsi delle ragioni così banali per liberarsi d'ogni preoccupazione ».

« Ora te ne puoi andare ».

« Me ne vado, ma dovremo certamente rivederci, un giorno. Ora partirò subito perché è inutile che resti ».

« Vai, vai acqua cheta, e sbrigati a fare carriera ».

« Se potessi farvi capire che cosa penso, Venturino, potrei spiegarvi che forse siete voi a fare una carriera, ma questo non occorre che lo sappiate e non è nemmeno necessario che lo capiate ». Natalina s'era stranamente animata pur rimanendo immobile nel mezzo della stanza: queste ultime frasi le aveva dette con un calore insolito che, in qualche modo, le aveva illuminato il volto nella sua soave impenetrabilità. Dopo cambiò tono di voce, si rivolse ad Agostino:

« Per fortuna, per lei non è stato grave, ne sono proprio contenta. Arrivederci Agostino ».

Il ragazzo scosse la testa e non riuscì ad articolare alcun suono mentre fu evidente che voleva dire qualche cosa.

Natalina stava andandosene quando la raggiunse questa frase di Venturino: « Vattene, lasciami in pace, non mi chiamo mica Marianna, lo ». Si fermò senza voltarsi come pensasse una risposta, ma poi, evidentemente vi rinunciò ed uscì dalla camera senza più salutare nemmeno Agostino.

I

I commercianti di Piazza Grande avevano notato più volte la lunga assenza di Venturino, l'ospite più puntuale e più in vista della loro piazza. Le giornate erano fredde e, per lo più, se ne stavano rintanati in fondo al negozio; ma quando c'era il sole, nelle prime ore del pomeriggio, le ore di meno lavoro, uscivano sul marciapiede e tra l'altro, non di rado parlavano di lui; si appoggiavano al muro vicino alla porta dei negozi:

« Non si vede più ».

« Ora fa il castellano ».

« No ».

« Come no ».

« Dice che sta male ».

« Male quello? Quello fa stare male gli altri ».

« Non è mica più tanto giovane ».

« Aspetta, dopo l'altra guerra, quando tornai dal fronte lui era un ragazzotto, faceva dei lavori... ».

« C'è chi dice che è ammalato ».

« Sarà ».

« Anche coi quattrini la salute non si compra ».

« Soldi ne ha, ma è sempre solo ».

« Prima c'era l'altro, facevano un bel paio: pare che la signora Carmela non abbia più la testa a posto, dalla morte del marito ».

« Eppure le ha lasciate bene, con un conto in banca che basta, e le proprietà ».

« Certo la figlia marito non lo trova ».

« Non avessero soldi, ma ne hanno e vedrai che finiscono per trovarlo ».

« I quattrini non sono tutto ».

« Ma averli non guasta ».

« Se sono tanti non guasta davvero ».

« Beato lui ».

« Ti ci cambieresti? ».

« Magari ».

« Io non mi cambierei con nessuno ».

« Chi vuoi che si cambi con te ».

« Tempo fa arrivò una signora forestiera ».

« La vidi; scese dal pulman e lui l'aspettava ».

« Chi sa che amicizie ha ».

« Coi soldi si hanno le amicizie che si vuole ».

« Ma lui è solo ».

« Una bella vita; starsene al caffè, in una villa come quella e gli altri che lavorano per te ».

« Beato lui ».

« Chi lo sa, i quattrini non sono tutto ».

« No, ma averne tanti... ».

« Quanti n'avrà fatti? »

« Durante la guerra chi glieli ha contati, e lui non guardava di love venivano ».

« Ora se ne infischia, suo padre muore di fame e, padre e madre non sempre padre e madre, no? ».

II

« S'è avvelenata una radice nei Frateschi », diceva qualche volta Casimiro rompendo i lunghi silenzi nei quali, assieme alle donne, nella cucina col camino acceso consumavano le giornate invernali: le due donne non rispondevano mai.

Qualche volta arrivava Agostino che s'intratteneva con loro, ora che nei campi non c'eran lavori da fare. Entrando chiedeva: « Ha scritto? ». Se era arrivata una lettera ne parlavano brevemente.

« Lei ormai vive lassù, così lontano ».

Se invece non era arrivato nulla il vecchio tutt'al più ripeteva un'altra volta: « S'è avvelenata una radice nei Frateschi ». Poi tacevano tutti.

La vita della casa comunque era mutata, il denaro di Natalina pur non avendo causato mutamenti rimarchevoli aveva allontanata la crudezza delle privazioni ed il tempo era meno nemico, anche se le giornate parevano più lunghe ora di prima.

« Tornerò appena posso », diceva Agostino andandosene. « Quello era l'uomo! Altro che andarsene, a che fare non si sa. Ma a che serve ormai, meglio non parlarne ». Le due donne tacevano, sembrava però che fossero d'accordo col vecchio, anche se ogni sera pregavano Dio per ringraziarlo d'essere stato buono con Natalina.

III

L'inverno, che in un primo tempo era stato mite, ora era arrivato a gelare la campagna; loro non se n'erano accorti, però, la fiam-

ma del caminetto non era stata un avvertimento sufficiente. Venturino era rimasto sempre a letto con il braccio immobilizzato e Agostino, per quasi intere tutte le giornate e le notti, era rimasto seduto vicino a lui. Soltanto il giorno che Venturino si alzò e, avvicinandosi ai vetri della finestra ebbe un'esclamazione vedendo la campagna stinta, nuda, nel grigio limpido e ventoso della stagione rigida, « Già, è inverno », fece Agostino, e se ne accorgeva solo allora, anche se aveva avuto occasione d'uscire più di una volta.

Quando Venturino cominciò a circolare per la casa, ed il dottore sciolse finalmente le bende affinché il braccio riprendesse pian piano la sua articolazione, ordinò al ragazzo di andare a prendere i libri dei conti, quelli nascosti: « Abbiamo molto da fare a rimetterli in pari ».

Agostino andò allo stabilimento, salì al quinto piano dell'impalcatura dell'essiccatoio con la solita cautela per non essere scorto dal personale, si avvicinò al nascondiglio e ne trasse i registri. Lassù, sull'orlo delle traverse dell'ultimo ripiano del capannone alto dieci metri dal pavimento, rimase un attimo a guardare. Era da lì forse che suo padre era caduto, ma non pensava a questo, eran cose che sapeva confusamente, e suo padre, non riusciva nemmeno a ricordare com'era. Rimase a considerare di lassù l'impiantito: era così che l'aveva avuto davanti agli occhi durante la giornata che aveva passata a letto con la testa fasciata. Bastava schiodare le due traverse estreme dell'impiantito, che terminavano proprio nel punto in cui ci si doveva fermare per prendere i registri dal nascondiglio tra i travi del soffitto; una cosa da poco, Agostino sapeva come fare, sapeva dove trovare nel capannone stesso, giù dove si aprivano le casse in arrivo e si confezionavano quelle in partenza, un arnese fatto apposta; lo si poteva fare tanto facilmente, senza che nessuno vedesse.

Tutto quel lavoro aveva ora perduto ogni significato, nella sua testa era rimasta l'immagine di ogni gesto che avrebbe dovuto fare per realizzarlo e lì, sul posto, erano riaffiorati così vivi che farne una realtà era come la ricostruzione d'un fatto semplice, già vissuto in ogni particolare. Non gli passò nemmeno lontanamente per il capo che qualche operaio poteva salire fin lassù a stendere le pelli: comunque la cosa era improbabile, perché da anni venivano usati solo i primi tre ripiani dell'impalcatura.

Venturino rimase ancora parecchi giorni in casa, lavorò tranquillo aiutato da Agostino il quale non si era mai sentito così bene vicino al padrone che sembrava sonnecchiare. Il padrone invece, malgrado le apparenze, se pur aveva in quel momento dimenticato il Giaccaì, Natalina e tutte le sue peripezie degli ultimi tempi, più che riprendeva forza e si rimetteva, più sentiva intorbidarsi la mente. L'unica cosa

he con una certa frequenza balenava nella sua memoria e lo ravvivava li un affannoso risentimento peggiore di quella depressione, era il ricordo della morte di Francesco: due cose in qualche modo riuscivano ad agitarlo finché non reagiva, la morte di per se stessa come gli si era presentata, e la disperazione della signora Carmela che, più gli sembrava ridicola, più lo feriva oscuramente. Comunque aspettava di sentirsi del tutto ristabilito per riprendere la sua vita normale e, con essa, rimettersi in carreggiata, perché era stupido vivere in quel modo.

IV

Tornata a Torino, Natalina pareva presa dalla febbre del lavoro; ormai il laboratorio ed il negozio dipendevano esclusivamente dalla sua attività e Marianna, se pur ne era orgogliosa, era anche contrariata che il lavoro sottraesse la ragazza alla sua compagnia. In verità era lei stessa che aveva fatto in modo che Natalina divenisse sempre più indipendente nel curare i suoi interessi, ciò le faceva bene, la sveltiva, la rendeva forse un poco più socievole, più disinvolta ed esperta. Però, ora che non sapeva più che fare, le pareva di essersi trovata vecchia tutt'un tratto, ed aveva rapidamente rinunciato a molti dei vezzi che l'avevano resa giovanile fino a poco tempo avanti. Ora la sua unica vera occupazione era quella di sorvegliare e di seguire Natalina: mentalmente essa chiamava ciò interessarsi dell'educazione di Natalina. Ma la ragazza si evolveva così rapidamente che lei, più che prevenirli seguiva lo stento certi cambiamenti che si verificavano nella personalità di Natalina, nel suo gusto del vestire, in un certo interesse alla lettura a cui Marianna l'aveva con accorta sagacia indirizzata. Malgrado tutto però, più l'apparenza rivelava dei profondi cambiamenti, più Marianna che ormai viveva solo di quello, si accorgeva che la ragazza rimaneva solidamente piantata sulla sua antica struttura di fanciulla campagnola, di pesciatina piuttosto chiusa in se stessa e fissa nei suoi oscuri problemi.

Ogni tanto Marianna, quasi con un atto di forza, la costringeva per qualche ora o per qualche giorno a lasciare le cure del commercio perché potessero stare un poco assieme. L'abitudine ad avvicinare molte persone aveva resa più facile una conversazione con lei; ma Marianna sapeva che in sostanza, per un poco di parole in più, essa non era affatto divenuta più loquace o espansiva di un tempo. Verso di lei però, ogni tanto, la ragazza aveva dei momenti di affettuosa comprensione; pareva che essa volesse volontariamente esprimere un doveroso sentimento di riconoscenza. Marianna sapeva comunque con esattezza che non si trattava di un dovere, ma di un sentimento reale che essa non avrebbe mai espresso, nemmeno in quel tenue modo, se non se lo fosse imposto ragionevolmente, in certe circostanze.

« Pensi troppo a me, dovresti fare qualche cosa. A volte mi domando che diritto ho di occupare tutto questo posto presso di te » diceva in certi momenti Natalina.

« Ti sembra sia ancora tempo di fare discorsi di questo genere a me? Quasi dovrei risentirmene; sono due anni che stiamo assieme; tu ti sei resa utile, necessaria, ma di questo a me interessa relativamente poco, non è questo che mi interessa. Puoi parlarmi di tutta la riconoscenza che vuoi, ma non è con quella che noi vivremo serenamente assieme ».

« Lo so, ma l'affetto, quello fatto così, io non l'ho mai conosciuto prima; quello di cui si può parlare, di cui mi puoi chiedere se vuoi. Io non ho mai detto parole su questo, e non devi giudicare da quello che dico ».

« Giudico da quello che non dici, Natalina. T'ho guardata giorno per giorno mutare, e, per questo, t'intendo lo stesso ».

« Ci sono molte cose diverse a guardarmi, ma in realtà sono sempre quella di prima ».

« Anche questo lo so ». Dopo un poco Marianna, seguendo un proprio pensiero, continuò il discorso con un altro tono. « In te rivedo lui. Vi somigliate assai, anche se ti sembra una enormità ». Natalina fece un segno affermativo con la testa. « Ma quello che lui cercava era diverso ».

« Io a volte penso che tutti cerchiamo la stessa cosa, anche se i modi sono diversi ».

« Questo no! »

« Eppure io lo penso ».

Marianna non aveva portato a caso il discorso su Venturino, sapeva di capire bene alcuni pensieri di Natalina, per questo domandò ad un certo punto:

« Ma che pensi di fare, che ti serve insistere con lui? »

« Non lo so, perché me lo dici. Penso che devo ancora tornare. Lo debbo, ecco tutto ».

« Ma un uomo come quello non merita alcuna attenzione. Pensavo che io dico questo e gli ho voluto bene. Eppoi a che ti serve, ormai ».

« A nulla; ma a volte è come se anch'io avessi colpa della sua malvagità ».

« Che colpa vuoi avere tu ».

« Non lo so, è così ».

C'era della pena in quel ragionare di Natalina, Marianna però era felice guardandola, si accorgeva che in quella bella creatura riviveva per lei qualche sentimento simile a quelli che avevano occupato le ore migliori della sua vita: era stata materna col giovane Venturino.

V

Il giovane Maino, quand'ebbe intascata la ricevuta firmatagli da Natalina rimase ancora davanti al tavolo; Natalina lo guardò, lui volse gli occhi altrove e, con l'altra mano che aveva sempre tenuta nascosta dietro la schiena, depose un piccolo mazzolino di viole sulla scrivania. Natalina si volse di nuovo verso di lui, poi considerò un poco il mazzetto di fiori, poi di nuovo Gigi Maino.

« Fiori », chiese.

« Fiori ». Stettero un attimo in silenzio, la ragazza vagò un poco attorno con lo sguardo privo d'espressione; a lui sembrò dura, quasi ostile.

« Violette », precisò.

« Violette », ripeté Natalina. « Le posa lì? »

« Lì, per lei ».

« Per me ».

« Sì, signorina ». Natalina li lasciò dove stavano. « Non le vuole orse? ».

« Ma sì, sono belle ».

« Non le ha nemmeno guardate ».

« Ma sì che le ho viste ».

« Allora me ne vado, e grazie ».

« Io, debbo dirle grazie ».

« Ma perché, arriverla ».

« Arriverla, Maino ».

Il giovanotto uscì frettolosamente dall'ufficio. Natalina rimase a guardare il povero mazzo di fiori come se non avesse capito ancora bene di che cosa si trattava.

« Violette di questa stagione », fece la direttrice del Maglificio entrando in quel momento nella stanza di Natalina.

« Fiori ».

« Oh, quanto mi piacciono i fiori ».

« Al mio paese c'è chi si arricchisce, coi fiori ».

Gigi Maino correva in macchina verso casa sua forzando il motore più del necessario. Era irritato con se stesso: « Non ci torno più, che strano modo di fare ». Aveva parlato ben poco con lei nei brevi incontri. Quando andava a pagare le fatture del padre, che era il maggior cliente del maglificio, scambiavano solo le parole necessarie; ma com'era possibile trovare di che parlare, con quella?

Natalina, invece, tornando a casa teneva in mano il mazzolino di violette. Fu tentata di lasciarle cadere in qualche angolo, ma poi le sembrò una cosa buona tenerle.

« Me le ha portate Gigi Maino », disse a Marianna.

« Carino ».

« Già ».

« Come ti sembra quel ragazzo? ».

« Bravo ».

« Ma non ti sembra che abbia della simpatia per te? ».

« Certo, ma a che serve ».

« In queste cose non ci sono consigli migliori degli altri, Natalina ».

« Lo so, ma è quasi irritante, lui come tanti altri che vogliono essere troppo gentili ».

« Devi essere l'unica donna al mondo che pensa così ».

« In che modo dovrei pensare ».

« Come vuoi. A volte penso che sei ancora una bambina ».

VI

Il limpido inverno, fuori della casa dei Frateschi pareva avere cristallizzato anche la luce grigia e chiarissima della giornata; gli alberi del bosco erano neri al limitare del podere, il freddo aveva fermata la vita, ma nel camino un buon fuoco riscaldava la cucina, ed il vecchio e le due donne stavano seduti ai tre angoli opposti della stanza ad aspettar che un'altra giornata finisse. Non si dicevano una parola, rimanevano immobili ognuno coi propri pensieri incomunicabili eppure del tutto simili. La tristezza mortificante d'un tempo ora era stata rimpiazzata da un'altra tristezza più vaga, tutta imperniata sull'assenza dell'unica persona giovane della famiglia. Essi non pensavano nemmeno lontanamente che dovevano in qualche modo gratitudine a Natalina che aveva evitato, con la sua partenza, l'orrido sprofondamento nella miseria assoluta; a questo non pensavano, la casa era la loro, le terre le avevano, e anche se, trascurate, non rendevano più, per essi la miseria era rappresentata soltanto dalla mancanza o dalla perdita di quelle robe; c'era piuttosto, nel loro pensiero per la ragazza, una specie di continuo risentimento, come se avesse disertato una battaglia che combattevano assieme.

Quel giorno, verso le tre del pomeriggio Agostino riscosse il loro letargo entrando improvvisamente nella cucina.

« Buongiorno ».

« Ehi ».

« Come state ».

« Bah ».

« Ha scritto? ».

« In questi giorni no, siediti ». Agostino si mise a parlare di alcuni lavori che avrebbe iniziato col primo bel tempo nel podere e che avrebbe fatto lui la domenica, magari cercandosi un aiuto col quale avrebbe prima trattato convenientemente. Questo argomento aveva il

potere di rianimare il vecchio che, per l'occasione distoglieva lo sguardo dal pavimento.

« Oh, la gioventù! ».

« Agostino è buono », fece la moglie di Casimiro, mentre la mamma di Natalina si limitava ad assentire scuotendo la testa.

« Non avete nessuno che vi guardi la terra; io, quando posso... ».

« Sei bravo, figliolo », disse il vecchio.

« A me fa piacere, almeno non sono solo ».

« Tu vedi tanta gente ».

« Chi volete che veda ».

« Noi siamo vecchi ».

« Io vengo tanto volentieri qui a fare qualche lavoro. Ora sono un po' libero, quello là si è calmato ».

I tre vecchi alzarono contemporaneamente la testa, in realtà inespessivi; ma tanto bastava perché si potesse chiaramente intendere che l'incauto quanto indiretto accenno di Agostino, aveva evocato contemporaneamente nei tre una immagine insana.

« Che ti piglia », disse Casimiro, poi guardò di sfuggita le donne e fu come se si vergognassero gli uni degli altri. Agostino rimase interdetto, ma è da credere che non afferrasse bene il senso ed il valore di ciò che aveva suscitato: infatti, se mai aveva fatto allusione a Venturino in tanto tempo che frequentava quella casa, era soltanto perché un inconsapevole istinto l'aveva salvaguardato dal cadere in quell'errore. Forse voleva in qualche modo rimediare quando aggiunse:

« Perché è un po' cambiato, sapete ».

« Chetati », disse il vecchio ad alta voce, non senza una punta d'ira.

« Che ho fatto? » chiese Agostino mortificato.

« Nulla, nulla », disse la madre di Natalina facendogli un vago cenno che voleva consigliargli di tagliar corto. Rimasero lungamente in silenzio ed infine Agostino disse: « Tornerò quando posso, parleremo dei lavori ».

« Ciao ». Quando se ne fu andato Casimiro alzò un braccio verso il soffitto e disse: « È entrato del veleno nel sangue dei Frateschi. Io morirò presto ».

VII

Ormai, laboratorio e negozi, riorganizzati da Natalina, avevano preso a funzionare meglio ancora che nei tempi migliori. Negli ultimi anni Marianna aveva un poco lasciato correre, i suoi interessi erano rimasti piuttosto in balia del suo personale; ma ora tutto era tornato come prima, anzi non poche innovazioni tutt'altro che disprezzabili meravigliavano Marianna la quale, da pura spettatrice, osservava il

miracolo di quell'energia che si sprigionava da un essere così delicato e dolce. Anche lei ai suoi tempi aveva dominato le proprie cose, ma aveva agito con una certa brillante fatuità di donna elegante, facile di parola, disposta a godersi i propri guadagni ed a lavorare seriamente, ma senza dimenticare nessun minuto piacere di buona borghese. Natalina invece pareva che si fosse creata un metodo, che avesse seguito fin dal principio un piano preordinato attuandolo con tutto l'impegno e tutte le proprie energie sfuggendo alcunché che potesse apparire un diversivo, un correttivo. Certo, i risultati erano stati stupefacenti e, se Marianna sapeva apprezzarli, non per questo quell'assiduità non la infastidiva ed essa si adoprava a romperne il corso piuttosto che ad incoraggiarla.

Natalina aveva il dono di apparire fin eccessivamente attraente alla maggior parte delle persone, pur comportandosi con una parsimonia di parole e di gesti, che in un paese come quello, tutto fatto di parole, di caratteri estroversi, doveva addirittura parere orribile. E non erano tutte donne, e nemmeno tutti vecchi commercianti, coloro che le accadeva d'incontrare per il lavoro e coloro che Marianna le faceva incontrare a casa. Comunque, lontano dall'esserne lusingata od in qualche modo turbata, pareva passasse in mezzo a quella specie di collettiva ammirazione come se non si accorgesse di nulla. Marianna però aveva imparato ad osservarla assai bene, ed era tutt'altro che convinta che Natalina non si accorgesse di tutto ciò e ne valutasse ogni aspetto.

Nessuno aveva guadagnato terreno con Natalina, anche se certamente ormai essa aveva imparato ad essere civilmente socievole, se pur affatto espansiva. Gigi Maino era tra i suoi più assidui ammiratori, pur non essendo certamente tra i più interessanti. Il ragazzo divertiva Natalina, ma nessuno avrebbe mai indovinato questo pur piccolo interesse ch'essa nutriva per lui. Quando la veniva a trovare in ufficio, o per affari o con piccole scuse, essa si divertiva a cercar d'indovinare quale regaluccio nascondeva senza avere il coraggio di tirarlo fuori, paralizzato dalla sua indifferenza ogni volta che avrebbe dovuto dire: « È un regalino per lei, lo prenda ».

VIII

Agostino aveva cominciato a lavorare nei campi dei Frateschi, ed approfittava di tutti i piccoli ritagli di tempo in cui era sicuro di non essere ricercato alla villa, per correre là a fare qualche cosa. Nei primi tempi, se non era domenica, osava solo assentarsi quando era perfettamente sicuro che il padrone non l'avrebbe assolutamente cercato: poi, con l'abitudine, se pur rimase cauto, fu indotto involon-

ariamente ad approfittare più spesso, a rischiare con un margine minore di sicurezza. Infatti quel giorno, tornato in villa, non era ancora entrato nel suo stanzino che si sentì chiamare da Venturino il quale, secondo i suoi calcoli, doveva essere ancora fuori. Corse allarmato e rimase col fiato sospeso quando si trovò davanti al padrone che lo guardò severo, prima di domandargli duramente:

« Dove sei stato? ». Agostino non seppe che cosa rispondere e fece un gesto vago e sconnesso.

« Dove! Ti ho cercato un'ora fa, che novità è questa? ».

« Nulla padrone, dovevo andare là ».

« Là, dove, stupido ». Agostino non rispondeva. « Non vorrai mica fare il furbo con me ».

« No padrone ».

« Dove sei stato? ».

« A lavorare un poco nel campo ».

« Campo di chi. Hai dei campi tu? ». Agostino fece segno di no con la testa.

« Anche tu hai dei misteri ora; ma che succede qui. Dove hai lavorato? ».

« In un campo sullo stradone ».

« Se tu credi di poter giuocare con me ti sbagli, lo sai pur bene chi sono io, non ti rimane che rispondere subito ».

« A lavorare i campi di vostro padre », disse Agostino tutto d'un fiato, terrorizzato.

Venturino che aveva parlato col timbro potente e rabbioso, pareva dovesse avventarsi contro il ragazzo; ma quando udì quella risposta quasi sembrò immediatamente placato.

« Così » disse tra i denti; poi prese Agostino per il collo della giacca, lo fece voltare e lo spinse fuori della stanza col piede senza colpirlo, mentre diceva: « Credevo di essermi liberato di queste storie ed invece ora sei tu a portarmele a casa. Vai di là, metterò le cose a posto io finalmente, qui. È nata della confusione ». Gridava e sembrava contento; in quel momento sentiva di aver riacquistata l'antica salute, la forza di un tempo, il dominio.

Più tardi, mentre il ragazzo l'aiutava a finire di mettere in ordine i registri dell'amministrazione segreta, gli disse:

« Se ti venisse ancora in mente di uscire di casa quando devi stare qui, per andare chi sa dove, ti assicuro che passerai uno dei momenti peggiori della tua vita. Ora si ricomincia a lavorare davvero, ora finiremo queste cose eppoi vedrò io quello che c'è da fare. Basta con tante stupide storie, ora qui si fila più di prima. Inteso? ».

I

La domenica Casimiro era già in cucina, si metteva a sedere ed aspettava. Quella domenica però passarono molte ore e lui ancora aspettava con l'orecchio teso per avvertire i passi sull'aia di chi si fosse diretto alla casa. Agostino doveva piantare un intero campo di piante di cavolo già preparate da lui fin dal giorno avanti, ma non si vide. Arrivò a mezzogiorno ed anche le donne, mentre senza fretta preparavano la minestra, stavano attente e silenziose nella speranza che si udissero i passi del ragazzo. Attesero tutta la giornata, infine il vecchio ruppe il silenzio.

« Anche lui non viene più ».

« Non avrà potuto, perché non deve venire più? ».

« La domenica è sempre stato puntuale ».

« Avrà avuto da fare ».

« Non viene più, c'era da aspettarselo, lo sapevo ».

« Perché poi ».

Il vecchio era sgomento, e l'assurda sicurezza d'aver perduto l'unica persona che continuava un poco il lavoro nei campi gli pesava nell'animo.

« Non c'è più bene. Una maledizione ».

Verso sera Agostino si fece vivo. Cominciò a parlare prima ancora di essere entrato in cucina.

« Non posso più venire, sapete, non mi si vuole più mandare in questi campi; non posso più lasciare la villa. Sono scappato un momento per avvertirvi, ma bisogna che ritorni ».

« Non si vuole. Ah! non si vuole », ripeteva il vecchio alzando la voce.

« Mi dispiace ».

« Non ci hai colpa, tu. Siamo un bersaglio; e dice che bisognerebbe avere pazienza ».

« Non vi agitate Casimiro », disse la nuora. « Tanto non serve ».

« È facile dirlo, ora risiamo soli ».

« Se ripotrò mi faccio vivo, arriverci ». Agostino se ne andò rapidamente mentre il vecchio gli gridava dietro.

« È cambiato, eh! cambiato. Non essere grullo anche tu, che cosa vuoi che cambi, il sasso non cambia mica! ».

Più tardi, quando già era l'ora di andare a letto, Casimiro chiamò moglie e la nuora.

« Dobbiamo scrivere ».

« Che scrivere? ».

« Perché? ».

« Tu vai a prendere la carta e la penna ». Non era un'impresa facile, la mamma di Natalina sapeva scrivere, ma ogni volta che se ne presentava l'occasione cercava di esimersene. Dinnanzi al vecchio però non si sentiva certo di fare obiezioni e quando ebbe preparato tutto chiese: « Che si scrive? ».

« Si scrive », disse Casimiro, « che anche Agostino non può venir più, che i campi diventeranno uno sterpaio, che noi siamo vecchi, che la casa dei Frateschi finisce male, che i Frateschi eran sempre rimasti sulle loro terre, che ora siamo castigati. Non c'è più bene, c'è una radice avvelenata ». Tacque, osservò la donna che scriveva, poi aggiunse: « Che sarebbe meglio non si fosse nati. Non si può vedere la terra abbandonata. Che non si vuole che Agostino aiuti i vecchi. Che siamo soli. Grazie dei soldi, ma siamo soli. Basta ».

« E questo a che serve? » chiese la moglie di Casimiro che era rimasta sempre zitta.

« A che vuoi che serva, a nulla! » disse il vecchio alzandosi dalla sedia per fare due passi lungo la stanza, lento, piegato in due, con la faccia rivolta all'ammattionato del pavimento, alla terra.

II

La strada per andare a casa di Marianna a Villa della Regina, era una strada quieta dove non era difficile incontrare qualche coppia di amanti i quali, da quelle parti, venivano a rifugiarsi all'ombra discreta degli alberi. Fu su quella strada che Gigi Maino riuscì a dire qualche cosa a Natalina.

A forza di mazzetti di viole, di piccole cose, e non senza la scorta di tanti involontari sospiri, i sospiri che a Natalina davano tanto fastidio, Gigi aveva fatto qualche passo avanti; infatti Natalina aveva accettato qualche conversazione più ampia del consueto. Quella fine di giornata era riuscito addirittura ad articolare una frase un poco oscura, ma che chiedeva invece chiaramente il permesso di accompagnarla a casa. Gigi Maino aveva l'automobile fuori, ma quando si accorse che Natalina, più a gesti che a parole non si rifiutava, ignorò il veicolo ed assieme si avviarono a piedi.

« Lei non immaginerà mai che piacere possa essere per me fare due passi con lei ».

« Credo che potrei immaginarlo benissimo, se fosse il caso ».

« Non pretendo di essere troppo intelligente, ma non ho ancora ca-

pito se la sua è vera durezza, oppure c'è qualche cosa che non può davvero capire ».

Natalina si era prefissa, con l'accettare una volta tanto di essere accompagnata da quel ragazzo, l'obbligo di rispondere alle sue domande, non tanto per dovere di cortesia, quanto perché una volta accettata le pareva giusto rispondere.

« Non se ne preoccupi, io sono ancora una contadina toscana, una ragazza di campagna ».

« Come fa a dir questo ».

« Io dico quello che è vero ».

« Se sapesse invece che cosa vedo io in lei ».

« Non lo dica perché riesco ad immaginarmelo ugualmente ».

« Io ho molta soggezione di lei ».

« Non badi alle apparenze, sono tutte acquistate per caso. Non si debbono nemmeno dire queste cose, un uomo che soggezione deve mai avere ».

« Non so se capisco bene, ma il solo fatto che lei mi parli di queste cose per me è molto. Io sono un suo amico. Lei crede all'amicizia? ».

« Certo: ma non credo di aver troppo spazio per l'amicizia, ora ».

« Forse... ».

« Forse che cosa, che voleva dire ».

« No, una sciocchezza ».

« La dica pure ».

« A lei non piacerà ».

« La dica anche se non mi piacerà ».

« Forse lei è innamorata di qualcuno ».

« Era proprio una sciocchezza ».

« Allora non posso capire ».

Natalina si era pentita, in quel momento, di aver accettato di essere accompagnata, si annoiava di quella conversazione e disse al ragazzo con una certa vivacità:

« Ma quali sono i suoi problemi, quali pensa che siano i problemi veri delle persone ».

« Non capisco che cosa vuole intendere ».

« Lei Maino è un bravo ragazzo e, spesso, la brava gente non ha problemi veri: a me il più delle volte le ragioni delle brave persone mi sembra che semininno più male dell'odio, del peccato; perché le cose che più spaventano sono piene di vita, smuovono tutto dentro la coscienza, aiutano a cercare, mentre le ragioni delle brave persone spesso la uccidono, la vita ». A questo punto Natalina si sentì contenta d'aver accettata la conversazione con quel ragazzo, le sembrò di accorgersi che la sua mancanza di argomenti dava a lei la sicurezza per tirarne fuori di propri, tirar fuori idee che le sembrava di inventare abbandonandosi sicura al discorso come se parlasse solo a se stessa.

in pratica, non parlava proprio soltanto a se stessa, era come se facesse, bastava vedere la faccia sgomenta del buon ragazzo per dire che si era completamente smarrito dietro le parole di Natalina, la guardava senza saper più che cosa pensare, che cosa dire. L'unica cosa ch'egli ad un certo momento credé d'aver forse capito, fu il dubbio d'aver suscitato involontariamente nella ragazza una tristezza cui egli non poteva comprendere il significato, ed allora disse:

« Mi scusi, forse senza volere le ho causato qualche pena ».

« Tutt'altro; che cosa le viene in mente. Vede, mi ha parlato di amicizia e noi l'abbiamo sperimentata senza accorgercene. L'amicizia l'aiuto a capirsi, la pazienza a sopportarsi e lei mi ha aiutato ed avuto pazienza ad ascoltarmi. E di questo ora la ringrazio, in fretta perché siamo arrivati ».

« Allora lei è contenta d'aver parlato un poco con me ».

« Gliel'ho detto ».

« Così sono contento anch'io ».

Si salutarono. Il giovane Maino se ne tornò indietro, ma era tutt'altro che contento. Che cos'era successo, che si erano detti? Lui non lo sapeva e le sue idee erano alquanto annabbiate.

Natalina invece entrò in casa più vivacemente che d'abitudine, ed anche se si fosse trattata di una lievissima diversità, Marianna era così contenta a tutto quello che la riguardava, la osservava tanto, appena creava la soglia di casa, che non poteva non accorgersene.

« Natalina! » fece subito.

« Dimmi ».

« Come stai? ».

« Perché? ».

« Mi sembri contenta ».

« Sto abbastanza bene ».

Marianna non avrebbe insistito oltre ed era già felice di quella risposta; ma Natalina dopo un poco aggiunse:

« Mi ha accompagnato fin qui il giovane Maino ». Per un attimo Marianna si sbagliò, credé di poter pensare che Natalina si sentisse felice dell'assiduità del ragazzo; ma fu un attimo, capì che non poteva essere possibile.

« Sarà stato felice ».

« Lo ha detto anche lui; ma più che felice era perplesso ».

« Se tu alimenti le sue illusioni fai male ».

« Tutt'altro, forse ho solo parlato un po' troppo ».

« Tu? ».

« Sì Marianna ».

« È un bel fatto ».

« A volte vivere con la gente giova, s'impara a ragionare ». Ora anche Marianna era perplessa; ma finì per sorridere tutt'altro che contenta.

« C'è una lettera per te ».

Quando Natalina ebbe letta la lettera della sua mamma si avvicinò lentamente a Marianna.

« Ecco, mi pareva di saperlo. Ora dovrò partire. Leggi questa
« Ma se sei tornata da poco ».

« C'è bisogno di me, lo capisco ». Marianna lesse la lettera scorsa più delle poche altre che erano arrivate da Pescia, poi si rivolse verso la fanciulla guardandola interrogativamente.

« Lo capisci che debbo andare subito ».

« A dirti la verità non è che capisca molto ».

« Se non andassi mi sentirei colpevole ».

« Colpevole di che cosa? ».

« Mi fai una domanda più difficile di quanto non sembri. È così ma tu non devi preoccuparti. Se vado non penso che a tornare. La mia vita è qui, ma sarà tutta qui soltanto quando... ».

« Quando ».

« Non lo so. Quando non sarò più obbligata ad andare là: quando non sarà più necessario ».

III

Ancora non è l'alba quando dalla campagna molti carri attraversano Pescia e si dirigono al Mercato dei fiori. Transitano nel silenzio della cittadina, passano per la Piazza risvegliando in tutta la sua ampia piazza eco profonde, spesso accompagnate dalle sonagliere dei finimenti delle bestie da tiro. A quell'ora il garzone della panetteria è già dinanzi alla saracinesca del negozio che aspetta il padrone per cominciare il lavoro, accendere il forno. Quella mattina se ne stava un poco irritizzato, appoggiato allo stipite del negozio guardando i carri diretti verso il mercato. Passò anche un uomo che trainava un carretto a mano carico di rose tutte chiare, affastellate in ordine.

« Se son rose fioriranno », disse il ragazzo.

« Fioriranno loro, ma tu hai ancora da fiorire », rispose il vecchio.

« Io devo ancora fiorire, ma tu sei già sfiorito ».

« Meglio, son finiti i miei pensieri, così: tu invece non sai ancora che cosa ti aspetta. Potresti anche essere nato già sfiorito ».

« Uccello del malaugurio, un accidente che ti prenda ».

« Un accidente? La morte! » disse il vecchio mentre con uno strapazzo deviò il veicolo verso una strada laterale. Il ragazzo si mise una mano alla bocca e ne trasse un suono di scherno che rintronò per tutta la piazza. « La morte » aveva detto il vecchio con la sua voce rauca.

La morte, aveva udito Venturino che, a quell'ora veramente inso-
a, si trovava là, all'ombra ancora fitta del marciapiede opposto dove
case erano oscure contro i primi tenui raggi del mattino. La morte,
attenne a stento una imprecazione violenta. S'era fermato là senza
per che fare; guardò un attimo verso la finestra dietro la quale
chi anni prima stava sempre Francesco ad armeggiare coi suoi col-
idi, poi riprese a camminare. Dove andava non lo sapeva. Non gli
a mai successo, l'insonnia l'aveva perseguitato finché, esasperato,
era vestito ed era sceso in città a piedi. L'aria fredda del mattino
aveva confortato, eppoi quel silenzio che solo da ragazzo più volte
aveva conosciuto, quando andava a lavorare in qualche posto.

Malgrado propositi e momenti di violenta riviviscenza vitale, da
molto tempo trascorreva le giornate senza concludere nulla, da setti-
mane non curava nemmeno la contabilità arretrata e trascinava per
casa i registri senza finire di metterli a posto. « Rieccomi quello
prima ». L'aveva detto più volte, ma in realtà trascorreva pigra-
mente le sue giornate, scontento. Non era naturale tutto ciò, bisognava
impere quel cerchio d'apatia che lo chiudeva; passeggiando per la
città deserta ora aveva ritrovate molte sensazioni della sua adolescenza,
sue prime esperienze, i suoi primi guadagni, gli amici, i primi
raggi. — Ecco che cosa era necessario! — Un'idea gli aveva fatto
accelerare il passo senza ragione. Qualcuno gli aveva iniettato un virus,
il veleno che lo stordiva, lo rendeva nemico di se stesso. Ma forse
in quel luogo, troppo a lungo era rimasto chiuso in quella città. Un
raggio.

Tornò immediatamente a casa. Chiamò Agostino che si era appena
vegliato in quel momento e che corse spaventato per l'ora del tutto
solita.

« Dobbiamo lavorare. Porta i registri, questa mattina li mettiamo
regola. Oggi dobbiamo concludere tante cose ».

« Subito padrone ». Il ragazzo già correva per la casa, quella con-
tazione del padrone gli aveva messo la febbre addosso. Si misero as-
ieme alla scrivania ed a mezzogiorno i conti erano sistemati. Ventu-
rino aveva già predisposto per il pomeriggio; doveva passare allo sta-
limento per sistemare ogni cosa, doveva far delle spese, preparare
valigie.

IV

Andarono dall'avvocato che si interessava di varie questioni di
Venturino, dal valigiaio a comprare una valigia nuova, infine alla
merceria dove Venturino si trattenne quasi due ore coi suoi impiegati

dando ordini. In ultimo chiese ad Agostino di prendere i registri dalla macchina e di accompagnarlo all'essiccatoio.

Come sempre, Venturino saliva avanti, Agostino lo seguiva su per la scaletta coi registri sotto il braccio. Il povero cervello del ragazzo in quella giornata così concitata pareva avesse smesso di funzionare del tutto. Quando furono all'ultimo piano il padrone si voltò, chiese i registri. Mentre Agostino glieli porgeva i suoi occhi, guidati da un oscuro impulso, si posarono sulle traverse del ripiano dove lui poteva vedere anche i buchi dei chiodi che aveva tolto tanto tempo prima. Non che non ricordasse lucidamente quello che aveva fatto, era un sentimento confuso, come non si trattasse di cosa vera. Quando però Venturino stava per mettere i piedi nel punto in cui la traversa avrebbe irrimediabilmente ribaltato nel vuoto qualche cosa scoppiò nel suo petto gridò un no fragoroso, disperato che parve l'urlo di un animale. Venturino si voltò, troppo tardi, perché in quello stesso momento, sotto i suoi piedi la traversa non scivolasse, abbastanza in tempo per aver modo di assumere un istintivo atteggiamento di difesa che gli permise di allungare le braccia e di appendersi fulmineamente ad uno degli assi su cui venivano stese le pelli, rimanendo sospeso nel vuoto, mentre la traversa, sfuggendo, precipitava sordamente.

Nel grande capannone in cui il silenzio era abitato dal brulichio di tutti i rumori esterni, Venturino ed Agostino erano soli: due uomini soli, due destini avversi ed ormai legati ad una tragica ansiosa carica di segrete disperazioni. La consapevolezza dell'uno comunque era affidata crudelmente alla quasi animalesca disponibilità dell'altro. Ma di puro impulso vitale, di pura forza bruta furono in quel momento le reazioni dei due esseri: Venturino aggrappato orribilmente, sospeso nel vuoto; Agostino sbigottito, affidato agli imprevedibili impulsi della sua povera coscienza, imprevedibili soprattutto per lui stesso che non sapeva che cosa avrebbe fatto mentre lentamente, dopo essere rimasto un attimo a guardare il padrone che non poteva parlare e faceva sforzi disperati per tirarsi su, si sdraiò sulla parte del ripiano rimasta tenendo poi le braccia verso il padrone. Riuscì ad afferrarlo per una gamba alleggerendolo d'una parte del proprio peso che ormai sosteneva solo per forza di volontà, con le mani aggrappate come morse che stanno per allentarsi. Quell'aiuto permise comunque all'uomo robusto e disperatamente agile di fare un ulteriore sforzo, spostarsi, guadagnare il ripiano coadiuvato dalla presa del ragazzo. Venturino fu di nuovo in piedi, per un attimo si erse gigantesco e terribile; ma ancora non aveva potuto rendersi conto che ormai tutto era finito che le ginocchia gli si piegarono, e cadde abbracciato ad Agostino che stava ancora avvinghiato alla sua gamba.

Un attimo dopo però si liberò energicamente della stretta facendo

repotenza al tumulto delle sue emozioni, guardò dall'alto colui che aveva tentato di toglierli la vita. Non c'era dubbio; era stato lui.

Il ragazzo invece non sapeva che cosa stava succedendo, la sua mente era del tutto al buio; quando però sentì la voce del padrone a un attimo fu consapevole, dotato d'una insolita lucidità che lo rianimò.

« Chi ti ha messo sulla mia strada ».

Agostino che, effettivamente, in quella posizione sbarrava il passo al padrone, si tolse prontamente di mezzo.

« Mi tolgo subito, passi pure signor Venturino ».

Sul volto dell'uomo, l'empito dell'ira brutale che vi si era disegnata si disciolse, si trasformò in una smorfia ridicola, si dissolvé con uno scoppio di una risata fragorosa, franca e brutale, sofferta. Poi immediatamente sembrò stanco.

« Vai, sei poco più di una bestia. Vai a casa, corri, mi fa male vederti ». Agostino fuggì, si udirono i suoi passi precipitosi rintronare sulle scalette di legno giù per i cinque piani dell'essiccatoio, poi fu silenzio.

V

L'orribile avventura, dopo un primo momento di agitazione che l'aveva attanagliato alla gola, alle viscere, al cervello, lo condusse ad una ridda di ragionamenti oscuri, vertiginosi, lucidi che gli attraversavano la mente stancandolo. Sono dalla parte della ragione, si diceva; poi pensava: — Si può essere dalla parte della ragione? — Ma tutto ciò lo irritava profondamente.

Appena arrivato a casa ebbe bisogno di sdraiarsi su un divano nel salone dove rimase con gli occhi chiusi. Più tardi sentì freddo, ed in quella posizione chiamò Agostino che apparve davanti a lui quasi nell'attimo stesso che l'aveva chiamato. Gli si avvicinò lentamente, curvo, spaventato e quasi attratto dall'ignoto di ciò che avrebbe potuto accadere. Non accadde nulla. Venturino stette un poco ad osservarlo poi domandò:

« Che hai fatto ».

« Ho fatto male ».

« M'avresti voluto morto ».

« No, v'ho chiamato ».

« Perché l'hai fatto ».

« Non lo so padrone ».

« Troppo semplice; ma non so che cosa pensare nemmeno io, ora ».

« Io non voglio male, padrone ».

« Non vuoi male che cosa ».

« Male a voi ». Venturino stette un poco a guardarlo, faceva pena come un animale ferito mentre riprese: « Anch'io devo essere cattivo ».

« Anch'io, eppoi chi? Lascia correre, portami una coperta, voglio dormire ». Il ragazzo tornò con la coperta e l'accomodò con molta cura su Venturino.

« Che avete bisogno ».

« Nulla, vattene ». Ma rimase lì, fermo. « Vai ti ho detto ». Fece un passo indietro poi si mise a parlare.

« Perché, quando non vi faccio nulla mi picchiate, e quando vi faccio delle cose cattive mi trattate come quando siete stato a letto ferito? »

Venturino mugolò qualche cosa d'incomprensibile, poi gridò irritato: « Al diavolo! ». Pochi istanti dopo dormiva.

Dormì ininterrottamente quindici ore, non lo disturbarono, ed anche nelle prime ore del mattino, ogni tanto la cameriera andava a vedere senza osare di svegliarlo: nella stanza accanto stava ancora una cena fredda preparata fin dalla sera avanti. Solo alle nove si svegliò. Nel dormiveglia cercò di riordinare le idee, ma ci riusciva a fatica, forse avvertì la presenza di qualcuno, allora si voltò e, sulla poltrona in mezzo alla stanza, scorse Natalina che lo guardava.

VI

Coi capelli arruffati, il vestito in disordine e senza cravatta si sentì a disagio, tentò involontariamente di aggiustarsi e non trovò nulla da dire. Non aveva più pensato a lei, non l'aspettava più. Natalina si era alzata dalla poltrona e stava là, dinnanzi a lui, con le braccia abbandonate lungo i fianchi, immobile; si guardavano, il disarmante smalto degli occhi della fanciulla era freddo, essa sembrava calma e docile. Venturino però questa volta, riprendendosi, men che mai pensò di lasciarsi illudere da quell'innocua se pur preoccupante apparenza, tentò di essere ironico: « Ecco un'altra mia nemica ». Ma si accorse che la sua voce era stanca.

« Malgrado tutto non lo potete dire, io forse vi son meno nemica di tutti quelli che vi conoscono ».

« Amicizia allora? Se l'amicizia è veleno, qualche volta forse debbo aver già pensato una cosa del genere, tu vieni a portarmelo. Che cosa vuoi ora, è un brutto momento, ti avverto ».

« Una volta diceste che io so scegliere sempre il momento più adatto ».

« Basta con queste stupide frasi. Ora andremo avanti un bel po' in questo modo: un bel duetto, non conosco nulla di più ridicolo ».

« Volevo vedervi, volevo parlarvi un'altra volta ».

« Le tue parole, l'ho dovuto imparare a mie spese, non si sa bene che cosa vogliono dire; sembrano un capriccio, una stupidità incomprendibile, eppure invece debbono essere sottilmente armate, sono come un virus che entra sotto la pelle. T'ho preso troppo alla leggera, ma ora mi difendo da te in qualsiasi modo. È meglio tu te ne torni subito via ».

« Continuate a parlare quanto volete ».

« Ma chi me lo fa fare; perché. Io faccio solo quello che voglio; vuoi obbligarmi a parlare, parlare di che cosa, a che serve? ». Erano rimasti l'uno di fronte all'altro. Natalina impassibile rispondeva con la sua voce monotona, l'uomo sembrava parlasse come obbligato da qualche cosa a cui voleva opporsi con violenza. Appariva invecchiato, si avvertiva in lui come una specie di sospensione, di sospetto che attutiva la sua antica violenza. Mentre parlava sembrava facesse sforzi per tradurre quella penosa conversazione in strumenti coi quali potersi difendere con la violenza che l'aveva sempre salvato. Dopo una lunga esitazione si mise a sedere e Natalina rimase in piedi davanti a lui, ferma. Era la stessa, eppure in lei tutto era cambiato; quella figura elegante era la donna uscita da quella specie di neutra e malinconica bellezza d'un tempo, la donna che ripeteva la stessa immagine di prima accresciuta. Venturino cambiò tono.

« Sentiamo, tu vorresti forse che io mi vestissi della pelle dell'agnello, che piegassi il collo come un bambino pentito, che corressi davanti ai vecchi portando qualche cosa dei miei beni con le lacrime agli occhi chiedendo perdono. Perdono di che cosa? Queste cose sono poco vere, sciocche ».

« Giusto, sarebbe falso, oltre che inutile, accrescerebbe i mali senza nulla cambiare ».

« Ma allora sei forse tu che vuoi guadagnare qualche cosa con me; sono ricco e tu lo sai. È questo che vuoi? ».

« Nulla di tutto questo. V'ho detto che sarebbe un male ».

« Ma allora che vuoi, perché sei qui? Solo per tormentarmi, per rendermi pazzo d'ira. Io non so più che cosa voglia dire tutto questo; non si capisce più nulla ».

« Quando è necessario capire si può capire tutto, ma a volte non è affatto necessario ».

« Ma vattene. È tremendamente stupido tutto ciò ».

Natalina esitò un poco, poi disse: « Me ne andrò, ma dovrete essere voi a mandarmi via per sempre, a mettermi anche questa volta fuori di casa. Se lo fate io sparirò, sarà come se non esistessi, se questo vi piace ». Si poteva chiaramente vedere che Natalina, per la prima volta da quando s'incontrava con Venturino, aveva avuto un cambiamento di espressione, il suo volto si addolcì e non nascose un leg-

gero tremito delle labbra. Fu qualche cosa d'impercettibile ma non sfuggì a Venturino il quale rimase in silenzio. In quel momento la pendola suonò le ore e tutti e due l'ascoltarono, il loro pensiero s'incrociò, deviò su qualche immagine comune, ed assieme rincorsero l'ultima eco dei rintocchi.

« Demonio », borbottò Venturino senza capire lui stesso se si rivolgesse proprio alla ragazza che gli stava davanti. Poi aggiunse, alzandosi: « Ho bisogno di lavarmi la faccia, di mettermi in ordine; puoi aspettarmi qui; sono stanco oggi », ed uscì.

VII

Non sapeva che cosa fare sola in quella stanza, Natalina. Si rimise a sedere e chiuse gli occhi attendendo; ma dov'era la sua secca sicurezza d'un tempo, dov'era quella specie di protervia imperterrita che fin dal primo giorno l'aveva spinta ad affrontare Venturino, dove la stessa sicurezza, lo scattante bisogno di correre a Pescia che l'aveva fatta partire il giorno avanti? Ora le pareva di essere incerta, di non capire bene che cosa stava facendo. Che cosa voleva in definitiva? Avrebbe desiderato alzarsi e scappare per non farsi più vedere, tornare subito a Torino. Non seppe calcolare quanto tempo fosse passato, fu riscossa dalla voce dell'uomo, forte e sicura questa volta.

« Hai portato il male attorno a me. Ieri Agostino ha tentato di uccidermi ».

Ecco quello che aspettava. Sentì il sangue correrle al volto.

« Se davvero si potesse lo direi volentieri che anche quella è opera mia; tante cose, anche peggiori, a volte possono non essere il male ».

« Senti come ti sei messa a parlare ».

« Ho sempre parlato così, anche quando conoscevo meno parole ».

« Ti dai delle arie proprio ora che non potrai dire di essere migliore di me, perché hai ricalcato le mie orme in un modo addirittura impressionante, sembrerebbe fatto apposta; tutto ciò che ti sei procurata, perfino le parole che tu dici, te le sei procurate come io mi sono procurato quello che ho ».

« Non crediate che io pensi diversamente; ma voi v'illudete di capire troppo, lasciate andare che questo non è necessario ».

« Brava! ».

« Non c'è bravura in tutto ciò ».

« Vedrai che un giorno tutti odieranno te come odiano me ».

« Voi vi state difendendo con troppa pigrizia, in questo momento ».

« Io ho capito tutto, ho capito sempre tutto per fortuna: lo so che tutti mi vogliono male, che anche tu mi hai sempre odiato, vorreste vedermi rovinato e stupido, vero? ».

« Bisogna essere sinceri con se stessi, capir bene le proprie cose, prima di pretendere di capire quelle degli altri. Ma voi ora state pensando in un modo che non è il vostro, state difendendovi pigramente, ve l'ho detto ».

« Come vorresti che pensassi. Me lo immagino, dovrei versare qualche lacrima sulla mia vita, dovrei andare attorno a chiedere perdono. Non sento il bisogno di chiedere perdono a nessuno ».

« Non sarebbe utile, ve l'ho già detto. Non mi piacerebbe ».

« Ma allora che cosa ti servirebbe da me ». Venturino ora parlava con quella violenza ch'egli di solito raggiungeva ad un certo punto delle discussioni per lui troppo lunghe. Ma era una violenza diversa, con qualche cosa di fermo, ghiacciato, privo di quella spinta brutale con la quale risolveva le proprie questioni. L'assenza di quella brutalità che gli deformava il volto, inconsapevolmente rattristava Natalina, annullava in lei quella tensione con cui si era sempre sostenuta le altre volte. Essa se ne stava lì, tenendosi le mani l'una nell'altra e pareva che fosse sfuggita all'acerba rigidità rettilinea d'un tempo. Venturino continuò sul medesimo tono: « Ma allora che cosa vuoi; niente di quello che mi chiedevi, ci siamo avvelenati la vita a vicenda per nulla. Che cosa ci stai a fare qui allora? ».

« Io non so più che cosa potrei dirvi ancora. Non serve più. Sono sicura però che son qui per le stesse ragioni della prima volta. Ma ora me ne posso andare ».

« Tu mi confondi le idee. Ti sei presa la briga di tormentarmi per lasciarmi una rabbia che mi rode, una rabbia che non so che cosa sia. Vuoi che te lo dica, ho l'impressione che proprio ora che non vuoi più nulla, tu mi abbia in qualche modo rovinato l'esistenza. Io ho paura d'ogni debolezza, io non sono debole, ma la vita è una malattia che si guarisce con la morte ».

« Voi siete una forza, anche voi avete sofferto, ve lo dico io, ora state ragionando e vi dispiace, ma se ragionate siete una forza maggiore di prima. Si guarisce vivendola, la propria vita ».

« Insomma che cosa vuoi cambiare. Questa vita l'ho voluta io e ho fede in questa vita ».

« È bene che ci crediate. Una vita come la vostra, quando vi si crede, non si ferma finché non arriva dove deve ».

« Di che cosa parli ». Rimasero un poco in silenzio poi Venturino riprese: « Io vorrei sapere allora che cosa venisti a fare, che sei tornata a fare qui ».

Natalina esitò un poco prima di rispondere, poi, come ripetesse una frase a lungo studiata, disse:

« Io devo esser venuta a specchiarmi in voi, penso, oggi che capisco molte cose di più. Ma anche voi dovete esservi visto in me. Il resto non ci riguarda, non dipende da noi ».

« Io non ho più voglia di parlare, Natalina. Avevo deciso di fare un viaggio, lo farò; debbo fare un lungo viaggio per fuggire di qui, da tutto ».

« Fatelo, forse prima fuggivate davvero; fatelo ora e non lo farete per fuggire ».

« Io sono sempre lo stesso ».

« Certo ». Rimasero a guardarsi senza sapere più che cosa dirsi, imbarazzati. Infine Venturino fece un gesto d'impazienza.

« Ho da fare ».

« Io me ne andrò ».

« Addio Natalina ».

« Addio ».

La ragazza discese lentamente lungo il viale della villa, senza mai voltarsi sparì oltre il cancello. Da dietro la vetrata Venturino la guardò allontanare e, quando sparì dalla vista borbottò: « Ora non la vedrò più ». Rimase lungamente davanti alla finestra. « Questo era il modo di liberarsene. Questo! Quale? ». Si strinse nelle spalle, ma dopo un attimo borbottò di nuovo: « Possibile che non la riveda più? ».

VIII

Agostino aveva di nuovo ascoltato dietro la porta del corridoio, soffocato dalla paura. Quando poi aveva sentito che si salutavano momentaneamente era rimasto sgomento, qualche cosa rimaneva penosamente in sospeso nel suo animo semplice. Sentì la necessità di rivedere Natalina, ebbe paura che essa partisse senza che si fossero rivisti; ma in quel momento non osava certo muoversi. Infatti, più tardi Venturino lo chiamò, gli diede degli ordini, diede ordini a tutti nella casa: i preparativi per la sua partenza riprendevano.

Soltando al mattino, alzandosi presto, poté correre a casa dei Frateschi. Trovò i vecchi e Natalina già alzati. « Sono venuto a salutarla », disse timidamente.

« Stavo giusto pensando come avrei potuto fare a rivederla prima di partire. Ha fatto bene a venire ».

« Anche lei voleva vedermi? ».

« Certo, dobbiamo pure salutarci ».

« Anche il padrone parte ».

« Sì ».

« Io debbo tornare subito su ».

« L'accompagno fino sullo Stradone ». Percorsero assieme il tratto della via campestre che collegava la casa alla strada provinciale.

« Sono successe tante cose in questi giorni, cose brutte », disse il ragazzo.

« Le conosco ».

« Anch'io debbo essere cattivo ».

« Agostino, non ci pensi più, però stia attento a quello che fa, ora. È meglio pensarci prima alle cose. Ma lei non è affatto cattivo, glielo dico io ».

« Se lo dice lei è meglio ».

« Non ci pensi più, le cose succedono quando debbono succedere ».

« Non lo sono, allora ».

« No, Agostino ».

« Lei non tornerà più? »

« Tornerò, verrò sempre, ogni tanto, a rivedere i miei e se lei può, quando sono soli, li venga a trovare qualche volta ».

« Ci verrò, io non ho nessuno ».

« Grazie Agostino, ci rivedremo qualche volta ». Si dettero la mano ed il ragazzo si staccò da lei percorrendo quasi di corsa i primi cento metri di strada.

Natalina tornò indietro a passi lenti, aveva ancora tempo. In cucina si mise vicina al nonno che taceva e cominciò a parlargli affettuosamente.

« Non ti preoccupare, se vuoi i campi li puoi affittare. A voi ci penserò io, ora posso mandarvi tutto il denaro che occorre ».

« Noi non abbiamo bisogno di nulla ».

« Ma io penso sempre a voi, quando sono lontana ».

« Anche te abbiamo perduta ».

« Non dovete dirlo questo ».

« E dove li prendi? ».

« Che cosa? ».

« I soldi ».

« Lavoro, lo sai, ho sempre scritto tutto ».

« Io morirò presto ».

« Che le pensi a fare queste cose. Cercate di stare tutti tranquilli ».

« A che vuoi che pensi io ».

« Stattene tranquillo nonno, io tornerò molto spesso ».

« Così lontana stai ».

« Non è poi tanto lontano ».

« Ma il treno, ci vuole ».

« Certo ». Natalina sorrise poi salì nella sua cameretta a prepararsi le valigie.

IX

Nella casa di Villa della Regina Marianna aveva preparato molti fiori, una cena ancor più curata del solito, ed aveva passato lungo tempo in cucina per fare lei stessa un piccolo dolce per loro due.

Nell'ultima lettera Natalina preannunciava il suo ritorno per quella sera, ed ora la stava aspettando.

Appena sentì il taxi che si fermava alla porta di casa le corse incontro: si abbracciarono ed entrarono tenendosi per mano.

Sembrava che Natalina avesse acquistato in quel giorno la facoltà d'esprimersi con una scioltezza che non aveva mai conosciuta prima. Parlò a lungo infatti, raccontò tutto ciò che non aveva scritto nelle lettere, infine cominciò ad esporre alcuni suoi progetti di lavoro. Marianna l'ascoltava senza dir nulla, solo dopo molto tempo raccontò:

« Nei giorni scorsi sono stati qui a colazione i Maino, c'era anche il figlio che mi ha parlato tanto di te, povero ragazzo ».

« Sarò gentile con lui appena lo incontrerò ».

« Penso che sarà peggio; lui soffre veramente ».

« Lo vedrò volentieri, sarò gentile con lui ».

« Credo che lo renderai ancora più infelice ».

« Cercherò invece di farlo felice ».

« Non capisci, in circostanze del genere c'è un modo solo per far felice una persona, bisogna amarla ». Natalina guardò negli occhi Marianna e, per un attimo, l'antica impenetrabilità di quello smalto risorse mentre rispose:

« Io, a Pescia, è come se l'avessi consumato l'amore. Forse non sarà esatto quello che dico, ma con te posso esprimermi così, ed è vero che non ho nessun rimpianto per questo. Se non avrò l'amore c'è pur sempre una vita, sono giovane, mi sento ancora tanto giovane ».

« Io credo che in ogni modo Gigi Maino dovresti lasciarlo correre ».

« Vedremo, vedremo ». C'era un poco di malinconia nella voce di Natalina; ma poco dopo si mise di nuovo a parlare di alcune innovazioni che aveva progettato per il laboratorio. Marianna quasi non ascoltava più quello che stava dicendo, era felice di sentirla così, simile a come l'aveva desiderata fin dai primi tempi, eppure, avvertiva anche una pena assai profonda, come se lei, assieme alla ragazza, avessero perduto qualche cosa che non si avrà più.

CECROPE BARILLI

MARTE

Al 2nd Lieut. Goff
U.S. Army

I

*Mi mostrasti la piaga
nel cielo che ingombravi
e non so che budelle.
Qualche raro lampo ti sfregiava
la cotica molle,
e il tuo ventre smaniava in un rigurgito
di nubi dense e filacciose.
Forse era la criniera del tuo elmo
che il vento diradava
oppure acqua piovana
fradiciume di questo inizio d'autunno.
Un'aria color di corazza sosteneva
lo sfacelo della tua pinguedine.*

II

*Eri emerso dall'acqua soffiando
e nudo avevi portato il tuo gran corpo
a fanciulleschi giuochi sulla riva.
Erano girandole da saltimbanco,
fantasie del tuo torvo occhio nero.*

*Ma quando verso di me prendesti
cauto gravando sulle mani,
ed i piedi che a tempo oscillavano nell'aria
e l'informe grumo di carne
che ti batteva sul ventre,
procedevi immenso scorpione
incubo antico annidato nel mio profondo.*

III

*Eri seduto all'Olimpo
e tenevi le mani nascoste
quasi fossero zampe.
L'occhio tuo obliquo ci lambiva
e ci riassumeva con schianti improvvisi.
Ti assicurasti della muscolatura.
Ci passasti la lingua sul volto,
ad assaporarci.
E forte brandendo le narici
fino agli antenati ci fiutasti.
La muta protesta che ci saliva in rossore
con l'orecchio soppesasti.*

IV

*Noi li conoscevamo i tuoi amori,
quando ritornavi ammansito
al giuoco della palla.
Torreggiavi nel campo, e il tuo sguardo
si discioglieva nei colori.
Quindi la dolcezza dei muscoli a godere
sotto gli aranci sedevamo,
e nell'ombra felice dilaniavi
a brandelli le carni delle donne.
Noi ti tenevamo allora,*

*quando soffocavi nelle risa
le tue tristezze infeconde.*

V

*Tu mi additasti il cielo
e la tua mano si apriva
nera contro la luna.
Questo era il segno,
e già mi sentivo nera parvenza
contro la luna: un paracadute.
Ma tu come bene apparecchiavi i veleni
alla mia candida sete!
Ancora oggi, o Marte,
attorno alla tua lancia
conficcata nel cranio
mi danzano i sogni;
sono i fumi del tuo banchetto,
le esalazioni di quella ferita.
Vecchio bestemmiatore,
camminavi distratto
sopra il prezioso tappeto
che io ero.*

RITRATTO

*Mille anni oramai ha la tua barba
che ti feconda lo sguardo in un cielo
sereno e in un lontano navigar di nubi.
Essa ti persuase alla benevolenza
e alla dolcezza delle sieste.
Essa ti diede la pacatezza del gesto,
mise i panorami ai tuoi piedi.
In questi meriggi affettuosi
l'hai portata sui prati
ad un pascolo di brezze.*

PROMESSA DI NULLA

*Mentre le ghirlande dei carri da morto
sobbalzavano nello stupore,
e le campane sopra le teste
spalancavano i cieli,
e la gente sui marciapiedi
si segnava la croce,
e c'era tutta un'aria d'addio,
una semplicità,
ho raccolto una piuma di colombo
e l'ho nascosta tra i capelli,
con questa promessa di nulla
corro leggero alla morte.*

COME MI RASSOMIGLIA

*Come mi rassomiglia la mia vita.
La parola che spiando nello specchio
chiedevo invano al mio volto,
l'ho trovata facile e piana,
vivendo.
La vita cui ora fraternamente mi appoggio
ogni giorno, ogni ora mi conduce
per curve e labirinti,
— immagine dipanata
dell'oscuro groviglio
che io sono,*

NOTE BIO-BIBLIOGRAFICHE

degli autori che appaiono, nel presente volume,
per la prima volta in « Botteghe Oscure »

PAULÈNE ASPEL: 1922, le Calvados. Est actuellement professeur de français à la State University of Iowa, Iowa City, É.-U. d'A. A publié des poèmes, un conte, des essais et des articles en français et en anglais dans des revues américaines et françaises. Un recueil de poèmes, *Gout d'une autre terre*, paraîtra chez Pierre Seghers, Collection P. S., Paris, 1954.

JEAN CAYROL: 1911, Bordeaux. *Le Hollandais volant, les Phénomènes célestes, la Noire, Passe-Temps de l'homme et de l'oiseau e l'Espace d'une nuit* font partis de ses œuvres en prose et en vers.

ROBERT CONQUEST: 1917, Malvern, England. Educated at Winchester and Magdalen, Oxford, Robert Conquest's verse has appeared in numerous English reviews and anthologies. He has received several literary prizes. He works for the Foreign Office and has spent a period in Eastern Europe.

JOHN HYSLOP: 1926, Edinburgh. He has a degree in mathematics from London University and is at present engaged in scientific research in Scotland. « The Tide » is his first published story.

KAY CICELLIS: 1926, Marseilles. Of Cephelonian parentage, Miss Cicellis has written two books in English, *The Easy Way* (stories, 1950) and *No Name in the Street* (novel, 1952); a third book, consisting of « The Death of a Town » and three new stories, is now in the press. She has published in a variety of English and American reviews, at present works for Athens Radio.

PAUL FÉVRIER: 1915, Bruxelles. Pseudonyme de Marcel De Cleene. Publications: *Les Yeux ouverts* (Collection « Messages »); poèmes et des essais dans des revues italiennes, françaises et belges. Est actuellement membre du Comité de Rédaction du *Journal des Poètes* et secrétaire de la revue *Marginales*.

ISABELLA GARDNER: 1914, Boston. Associate Editor of *Poetry* (Chicago), Isabella Gardner has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *A Pocket Book of Modern Verse*, and, in the four years she has been writing, in all of the leading American little reviews.

HORACE GREGORY: Milwaukee, 1898. Horace Gregory's volumes of poetry include *Chelsea Rooming House*, *No Retreat*, and *Poems*: 1930-1940. He has also published *The Shield of Achilles* (essays, 1944), translations from the Latin, and, in collaboration with his wife Marya Zaturenska, *A History of American Poetry*: 1900-1940.

JOSEPHINE HERBST: 1897, Sioux City, Iowa. The author of seven novels, Josephine Herbst has published stories and articles in many big and little magazines. Her *New Green World*, a study of the 18th Century, will appear in May and the Noonday Press will bring out a new novel in August. «Hunter of Doves» is one of a series of stories, concerned with writers of our time, eventually to be published in book form.

ALBERT HERZING: 1927, St. Marys, Ohio. Albert Herzing has contributed verse to *Poetry*, *Epoch*, *Experiment*, and the *Western Review*. He was one of three winners in the Philadelphia Arts Alliance poetry contest, in 1953.

ROGER LAPORTE: 1925, Lyons. Est professeur de philosophie au Lycée du Maison-Carrée (Alger). «Souvenir de Reims» est son premier œuvre publié.

CHARLES SMITH: 1921, Adonna, Arkansas. «Four Poems on Pictures» are Charles Smith's first published works.

PAUL VALET: 1905, Lodz, Pologne. Publications: *Sans Muselière*, *Poème mutilée*, *Comme Ça*, *Matière grise* (tous chez G. L. M.). Collaboration aux revues: *Temps de la Poésie*, *Mercure de France*, *Les Lettres Nouvelles*.

ANDRÉ VANNIER: 1927, Valence (Drôme). «Les Prisonniers» est son premier œuvre publié.

GEORGE ANDREW VUKELICH: 1927, Milwaukee. George Andrew Vukelich is a staff announcer for a radio station in Madison, Wis. He has published poetry in *Idiom* and the *Beloit Poetry Journal*.

DAVID WAGONER: 1926, Massillon, Ohio. The author of a book of poems, *Dry Sun*, *Dry Wind*, his first novel, *The Walking Man*, is to be published by Harcourt, Brace, in August. He is now writing a second novel.

MARYA ZATURENSKA: Kiev, 1902. Marya Zaturenska is the author of *Threshold and Hearth*, *Listening Landscape*, *The Golden Mirror*, *Cold Morning Sky* (for which she won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1938), and a recent book on Christina Rossetti. She is recipient of the Shelley Memorial Award and the John Reed Memorial Prize.

ALTRI DISTRIBUTORI ALL'ESTERO DI BOTTEGHE OSCURE

AUSTRALIA	Edgar C. Harris 431, Bourke Street, Melbourne, C.1
CANADA	Ambassador Books, Ltd. 1149 King Street West, Toronto.
OLANDA, SCANDINAVIA	Hamish Hamilton, Ltd. 90, Great Russell Street, London, W.C.1
AFRICA DEL SUD	Oswald Gedling P.O. Box 1847, Cape Town
AMERICA DEL SUD, BEL- GIO, GRECIA, PORTOGAL- LO, SVIZZERA, TURCHIA	Département Etranger Hachette, 79 Boulevard Saint-Germain, Paris VI

SALE AND SUBSCRIPTIONS

Botteghe Oscure appears twice a year, in Spring and Autumn, at the following prices:

	U.S.A.	Great Britain	France	Italy
Single issue	\$ 2.50	12/6d.	500 fr.	1500 lire
Annual subscr.:	\$ 4.00	24/	800 fr.	2800 lire

Subscriptions should be forwarded to the agents for the respective countries.

Manuscripts should be sent to the Editor, via delle Botteghe Oscure 32, Roma, and will be returned only if accompanied by a self-addressed envelope and sufficient international reply coupon.

FINITÒ DI STAMPARE NELL'APRILE MCMLIV
NELLO STABILIMENTO DI TIVOLI DELL'ISTITUTO
GRAFICO TIBERINO (ROMA - VIA GAETA, 14)

PRINTED IN ITALY

